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a tale of love, betrayal and corruption in Kenya

LAURENCE JUMA



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Kileleshwa: A Tale of Love, Betrayal and Corruption in Kenya

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Corruption in Kenya

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Content

<i>Dedication</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Acknowledgement</i>	<i>ix</i>
Chapter One	1
Chapter Two	13
Chapter Three	21
Chapter Four	35
Chapter Five	45
Chapter Six	55
Chapter Seven	65
Chapter Eight	79
Chapter Nine	91
Chapter Ten	103
Chapter Eleven	121
Chapter Twelve	145
Chapter Thirteen	165
Chapter Fourteen	173
Chapter Fifteen	187
Chapter Sixteen	205
Chapter Seventeen	227
Chapter Eighteen	253
Chapter Nineteen	273
Chapter Twenty	291

Dedication

To my father,
Japuonj Stephen Juma Ogilo,
for his love of learning

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Chapter One

SEMBE WAS CONFOUNDED but mostly enraged. She couldn't imagine that Amu, her husband of fifteen years, was capable of loving another woman. For all those years, Amu had given her no reason at all to suspect him and she, in turn, had placed a benign trust in him, believing almost pretentiously that no woman other than she could sensuously appeal to him. Tonight, she couldn't have thought of him any differently if Kizito's tongue had faltered, or his words without that rare spike of candour that only occasionally graced his speech. But, she had restrained her anguish, patiently letting him empty all that was on his mind. And, by the time they got to town, she had heard it all; her appearance, their secret nesting place on Lango Road and their numerous escapades to night clubs in the outskirts of the city. And, even after she brought the car to a stop near Tik Tok Hotel and he stepped out, he turned to her. "I understand he is planning to take the bride price to her people at the end of the month," he said then walked away, leaving her stare fixed on his tall frame until it disappeared in the crowd of evening commuters.

Still unable to reconcile her thoughts, Sembe rose from the door-side stool where she had been sitting since coming from town, and walked across to the dressing table. With tears forming in her eyes, she fumbled through the drawers for a box of tissues. Finding nothing, she pulled out a chair and sat behind the table, gazing into an ornate mirror. A reflection of a face contorted with rage peered back at her. Repelled by the ghostly sight, she walked to the bed and sat on its edge as her eyes fell on the phone and the huge portrait of Amu leaning against the wall. But, she avoided his gaze and went for the phone. Her hands damp against the receiver, she hurriedly dialled Ayugi's number.

"It is about Amu," she blurted immediately Ayugi picked up the receiver. "The bastard ...has... been cheating on me."

“What? How do you know?”

“Kizito. He told me everything. Amu is marrying another woman. Her name is Beth. He is taking the bride price to her people next month.” Haltingly, bit-by-bit, her sentences punctuated by sobs and sneezes, she recounted what Kizito had told her.

“Oh, Ayugi, what I am going to do?”

“Nothing!”

“Nothing? Ayugi...I can’t just sit back and let him do what he pleases...I can’t. What about my children?”

“Look, girlfriend. Maybe, it is just rumours. You need to take hold of yourself. You hear me? Take hold of yourself. Those people are just jealous of you and Amu, believe me,” Ayugi asserted. But, sensing disbelief, she quickly added, “Why don’t you let me do a little investigation first?”

“That is fine. But...I just can’t believe it. The bastard is cheating on me!”

“Do me one favour, girlfriend?”

“What’s that?”

“Just stay calm. Do you hear me?” Ayugi’s voice, now reduced to a whisper, was soft and consoling. “Just stay calm. And please don’t confront Amu with this matter until we have proof of our own.”

Sembe did not know what to make of Ayugi’s advice. Ordinarily, she would have expected her friend to explode about Amu’s affair, castigating his every bone and advocating an immediate court martial. But, Ayugi’s cautious approach had made her think of the possibility that Kizito’s story might be devoid of truth or, worse, conceived in envy. She tried to recapture the details of it; shades of inconsistencies or overcast of events that simply did not add up. But all what came to mind was the enormity of Amu’s betrayal; the weird picture of him sneaking into the Lango apartment to comfort his mistress and the vile hatred she felt towards this Beth. Surely, there wasn’t anything to be cautious about. Amu had betrayed her trust and defiled their marriage. She had to do something hurtful that would compensate for her pain. “*Bastard!*” she mumbled, tears rolling off eyes and her heart sinking into a fathomless sea of regret and hate.

Amu arrived at about eleven o'clock to find Sembe in bed. She pretended to be sound asleep, hoping to discern subtly from his manner any inkling of a guilty disposition. But he seemed quite the same; the soft, self-centred and slightly inebriated Amu, not at all bothered by the temperament of his wife. He took his time in the dressing room, shedding his work clothes then replacing them with pyjamas. Then, he slid into the bed beside her.

With bigger problems looming and a heavy sense of loss burdening her mind, Sembe couldn't muster any sleep. She kept on turning from side to side.

"What's the matter, Sem? Are you feeling unwell?" he asked.

She kept mum. He switched on the bedside lamp and went to the bathroom. When he came back, he touched her forehead again but, this time, she removed his hand in a rather gruff manner. This must have provoked him.

"What's the matter, Sem?"

"What's the matter? What do you mean, what's the matter?" she blustered, while raising her body to sit upright.

"You are my wife. I am entitled to know if you are feeling unwell, or if there is something wrong, don't you think?"

"Your wife? That's a joke. You have many other wives or shall we say planning to have other wives next month. Why don't you ask them what's the matter?"

"What on earth are you talking about, Sem?"

"Oh, come on," she jerked, throwing the blanket to her feet. "Don't play dumb with me. I know it all. I mean your love affair. I know all about it. So, just be honest and let me know when you plan to have your queen put on the throne of the Amu Ndenda household," she said sarcastically.

"My affairs? Who has been feeding your brain with all this garbage?"

"Let me hear you deny it now. Is it true or not?"

"I can't believe you, Sem. Somebody told you a very, very dangerous lie. If only I could get that piece of..."

"Well, well, Mister Perfect Guy. It is not who has said what but rather what have you been thinking, sleeping around with bimbos all over town and expecting me to keep on playing the loyal wife? It is over, Mister Screw-every-bimbo-in-sight. I tell you, it is over!"

“Sem, if you can accuse me of adultery, then you don’t know me at all.”

“What are you saying? I know you perfectly well. How many nights do you come home late? Is it not every night? Those weekends, ‘Oh, Sem, I am going to the village... Oh, Sem, I am going to a seminar... Oh, Sem, this and that...’ But all these times lying to me...And yet...” She was sobbing now. “And yet, I sit here waiting and being faithful. You see me as a fool. I don’t want to die of AIDS. My children are still young.”

“Look, Sem, I’m not having any affair. So, stop it ...Please,” he implored.

“How about Beth? Yes, Beth. How long have you been sleeping with her?”

“Ooooh, so it was about Beth...,” he laughed haughtily. “I can’t believe this. The rumour mongers have surely got you this time, my love. Beth is just a friend, not a lover. Her cousin works in our office.”

“That cousin must be doing a lot of overtime!”

“It is not what they say. Sem, I love you very much except that sometimes...sometimes you hurt my feelings, like now. You and the girls are my whole life. I mean it. For you to say this about me is just outrageous.”

Without uttering a word, Amu rose up and went to the balcony off the bedroom. Through the silky curtains, Sembe could see his shadowy figure standing by the balustrades. For a moment, she did not know what to believe. *I hope Kizito was right*, she thought for, if he were not, then the accusation she had levelled against her husband would endure a lifetime of mistrust between them. But, then again, if it were true, she would be hurt even more. “Oh my God, what I have got myself into?” she cried.

He must have heard her sobbing. He re-entered the bedroom and went straight to bed. He snuggled her close to his body despite her gasp and rigidity. Sembe found herself being swept to her back. “Stop it, Amu!” she cried out. Then, he was on top of her, wedging his right leg between her thighs. She yelped and jerked to sit upright on the bed. Anger rolled inside her, spurred on by worry and uncertainty. She couldn’t imagine sharing him with another woman, “Damn you!” she snarled and got off the bed. She descended the

stairs into the dark living room and sat on the sofa. It was quiet in there, the air pregnant with a plaintive chill that played in her rattled mind. She picked up the phone and held it motionlessly on her chest for a good ten minutes before a creak in the hall startled her. When she looked up, her husband's tall frame made a dark silhouette in the dim light. He stood for a while, twirling the buttons of his pyjamas before making his approach toward her.

"What are you doing down here?" he mumbled, a sleepy grin barely visible on his face.

"I wanted to talk to a friend on the phone and I thought ...I thought I should not disturb you."

"Oh."

He moved closer and held her hands. She caught a whiff of his cologne and inhaled his scent deeply. She let the phone fall to its cradle as her body gravitated toward his.

"Do you love her? This Beth, do you love her?" she asked him.

"You have not been listening to me. I love you, Sembe, and not anyone else."

She bit her lip as he edged his mouth closer to hers. What was she going to do with him? She felt weary and clinging to him offered a temporary respite. With her body famished of a man's love, and him reaching out to her, she was almost helpless. And, even though she was a little embarrassed at conceding to his advances, she couldn't gather enough strength to keep him at bay. She ached all over from the effort and, at last, she quit trying, opting instead to catch the little pleasures that her body was yearning for, oh, so very badly.

Amu thought he heard the phone ring but when he opened his eyes, he discovered he had been dreaming. A short innocuous dream it must have been, though its precise nature he couldn't remember. In its wake, sleep had drifted like water on a high tide, leaving him blank and empty. He closed his eyes again, ignoring the little burning sensation in his loins and tried to lull himself into sleep. But his renegade mind rolled back the events of the evening, reasserting the feeling of guilt in his psyche. He thought about Sembe's accusations and wondered who it was that had told her about Beth. With such precise details, it seemed somebody had been on his

case. And that somebody was pretty close to either him or Beth. The only friend he had confided in was Cosmas, but he doubted very much if he would stoop so low as to talk to Sembe about it. Moreover, if he had such inclinations, he could have done so many months ago. That left Osolo and McOloo, with both he had discussed the issue in moderate depth. But with them too, there wasn't any sufficient closeness to his wife that could spur such talk. It seemed that the leakage came from Beth's side and that was something he could do nothing about. Now that he thought about it, the allegation that he was planning a marriage, which had no truth in it at all, must have been generated by a woman. It is women who pay attention to minute details of matrimony and are predisposed to lying about them, he silently concluded.

Sembe was deeply asleep, her body stretched in a motionless heap except for the rasps and heaves of her breath. Amu extricated himself slowly from her embrace and got out of bed. She stirred slightly and went back to sleep. He pulled the blanket over her and walked to the bathroom. He attended to the call of nature noisily and then ambled to the balcony. It was a dark and quiet August night, with a slow breeze fluttering through the branches of the mugumo and jacaranda trees in the compound. He leaned on the rails and gazed into the darkness. Through the branches, the sudden beams of cars passing on the road across from the small creek flashed across the compound, their temporary illumination quickly swallowed by the darkness. What remained still were the dim lights of the Shell BP petrol station, sitting at a bend on the road about one hundred metres away from the creek. The hazy outlines of the forest behind the petrol station imposed a dark finality to his gaze. In the near distance, a concrete fence ringed the one-acre property, shielding it from the happenings beyond the creek.

Not much was visible inside the compound because of the darkness but, in his mind everything, was as vivid as if it were day because the image of it was imprinted in his mind from the countless times he had stood at this very spot admiring this same scenery. The temperate lush of the shrubbery, daffodils, hibiscus and bougainvillea flowers punctuating the spread of greens on a field sloping toward the creek behind the house and the whistling branches of the trees had become permanent features of this landscape as

the property had become to his life. He remembered the first day they came to see it. The location of the property more than pleased his wife. Its proximity to the city centre and to good schools made it a perfect choice for a family home. The property had ample space, many times larger than their High End house. It was surrounded by a low concrete fence below which, a narrow Kayaba fence ran the gauntlet between the concrete and a line of well-kept flowerbeds. The fence was dotted by huge trees whose spreading branches nuzzled and scraped against one another. A decorated driveway and an ample garden complemented its plush location. The house on the property was in relatively good shape. It boasted a colourful brick façade, large windows and a red-tiled roof.

The first time Sembe saw the property, she couldn't hide her excitement. That evening after dinner, she slid onto his lap and hugged him so intimately. "Amu Ndenda, I love you so much and I will always be proud of you," she whispered into his ear. When they moved in a month later, he was amazed at the effort she put into decorating the house. She took leave from her work to do just this. But, as the days went by, Sembe's love for the house turned into an obsession. She became the reigning queen of Kileleshwa. The worst thing about her obsession was that she never consulted him on matters concerning the property. When she decided that a water tank was needed, she engaged a contractor to build it and only discussed the matter with him when money was needed to pay the contractor. The same with the servant's quarters and the redecoration work. He began to feel like a stranger in his own house. She determined even the most trivial of things such as the place where shoes should be placed and even the kinds of friends who could be entertained in the house. And because "Do not do this, do not do that," became her way of communicating, somehow they would end up quarrelling whenever he was home early from work. What was to be the greatest achievement of their life was now its greatest exasperation. No longer was the house a sanctuary against the ebb and flow of a demanding life, but an effervescent visage of all its failures.

Oppressed by feelings of ineptitude, he turned from the balcony and walked into the room, perhaps seeking something that could give him a taste of achievement from the years of toil gone by. The

oak table with a Sony television on its top, the dresser units lining one side of the wall, the silk curtains covering the two huge windows and the musk carpet on the floor gave an appearance of luxury but not a tinge of consolation. Still in search of the pyrrhic germ of atonement, he thought of putting on the lights but dismissed the idea when Sembe shuffled her legs and drew a long breath as if choking from something. She went back to sleep, but this time with a stuttering snore.

Amu went back to bed and slithered his body between the sheets. The warmth that met his body could have been delightful if it did not evoke thoughts of the impending explosion. He knew his wife would begin probing the nature of his involvement with Beth as soon as the next day. And when she discovers the truth, all hell might break loose. He agonised over how to proceed, knowing only too well that his earlier performance might have bought him but a few hours, or if he was lucky, a day of peace. If he had second thoughts about Beth, or her affection for him, it would have been easy. He could have capitulated and come back to his wife. But this wasn't even likely. He adored her almost to the point of worship and was sure she felt the same about him. How could it be that a woman he had known for only nine months had captivated him so much, he wondered.

East Africa Plastics (EAP), where Amu worked, was located five kilometres south of the city of Nairobi, in Industrial Area, a sprawling forest of Kenya's manufacturing and industrial complexes occupying the vast plains between the airport and the railway depot. The corporate headquarters of the company were on the same grounds where the factories were: off Magarini Road, the main street linking Industrial Area to the city centre and adjacent to the Vishnu Paper Factory. The administration block, which was closer to the road, housed the offices of the company's top brass. Amu's office was on the second floor. From there, he could see the factory and the parking lot abutting its loading area. It was there that Ayugi and Kizito, his office messenger, had stood engrossed in conversation a few minutes ago. Afterwards, Ayugi had driven off with a smile

written all over her face, like a person who had made a propitious discovery. Kizito had come straight to the office and he could hear him talking to Sally in his reception area. His initial impulse was to call Kizito into his office and enquire about the nature of Ayugi's visitation but he dropped the idea when he thought of its possible ramifications.

Kizito was from his village. In fact, they grew up together. But his employment at EAP had come by way of Sembe. When her constant prodding had become unbearable, he sought the Managing Director's approval to create the post of an office messenger and then hired Kizito to fill it. The manner of Kizito's absorption into the company gave their relationship a modicum of mistrust. Although he had never sensed any malevolence in Kizito's demeanour, the belief that the man could be Sembe's spy never escaped him. For this reason, he was careful, always keeping their talk within the ambit of safety. And even when they talked about Kodegi, their village, it was about benign subjects such as funerals and fund-raising. His view of Kizito was almost vindicated this afternoon when he saw him talking to Ayugi. If he made the mistake of asking him anything about Ayugi, he could surely affirm what the man had probably heard and was now contracted to investigate. How so very foolish might Kizito be, he thought, being set on his boss like that?

But, if Ayugi and Sembe thought Kizito was their man to shed light on the Beth issue, they were in for a surprise. He was going to freeze all movements that may give Kizito even the remotest idea of what he was looking for. He was going to put some brakes on his affair with Beth, slow it down a little bit and, in the meantime, observe how the trio were rattling themselves to naught. He made a quick calculation and decided that two weeks of abstinence might just be enough to ward off any suspicion. Within this time, he wasn't going to see Beth or even visit her Lango Road apartment, but only maintain limited phone contact. After the two weeks, he would take her out of town, maybe far away to Thompson Falls for a romantic weekend. When he called Beth at her office to settle this arrangement, he found that she was in a meeting. He sat back in his chair, his mind going through what had become of such a wonderful love relationship.

Theirs wasn't one of those great love stories where a man and a woman, wrapped in silent desire for each other, negotiate until the magic moment comes and their passion erupts in one single splash. Neither was it a tale of pursuit, where a disadvantaged male protagonist surmounts adversity to win the heart of the most coveted woman in the neighbourhood. Theirs just happened and this is why he thought of it as strange or rather intriguing, the way they first met and what became of it later on. If Beth were a baby, he probably could have named her *Chance* because this is how she came into his life. It was *chance* that made him decide to drive back to Nairobi from Kodegi that Saturday afternoon instead of the usual Sunday morning. It was also *chance* that brought Beth to his car when he stopped at the Kisumu bus terminal to pick up company for the long trip. It was then that it began; the illicit love affair that now rocked his life and threatened his marriage.

Amu could still picture her in his mind, managing a small smile as she gracefully settled into her seat. This had attracted his attention and he regarded her much more closely. She was a beautiful woman with well-proportioned features that matched, so elegantly, with her carriage and personality. Unaware of his attention, she removed her jacket, folded it carefully and laid it on her lap. Then, she drew the seatbelt across her belly and snapped the buckle beneath her ample hips. He saw the contours of her red bra through the blouse and did not know what to think. He had merely fastened his seatbelt and turned on the ignition.

As he drove out of the parking area, Beth removed a few tapes from her leopard-skin handbag and asked whether she could play them on the car stereo. He nodded. They were *Luo* singles by Waya Mamit. She slipped the tape into the deck and, suddenly, the famous voice of Waya bellowed from the powerful speakers. "*Atimra nade, Waya, gi wach hera...*" (What will I do about love?) This got them talking about musicians, then politics and many other things. Amu noticed that Beth was a woman of unlimited enthusiasm, quite congenial and full of intelligence. She seemed kind too, the sum of her admirable qualities radiated through a gleeful smile and iridescent posture. She had opinions on most things and wasn't shy to share them. And even when she disagreed with his views, she did so with sensitivity and panache. He liked a woman with whom he could debate diverse issues of life. This was indeed one of the reasons he

fell in love with Sembe. But, finding himself fascinated with Beth, almost the same way he did with Sembe fifteen years back, made him wonder whether it was a deficiency in his character or his low threshold on standards of intelligence that gravitated him to these women. Deciding not to burden his mind with much of what he would have plenty of time to ponder later, he drove on.

That day, he dropped her at her flat in Eastleigh.

He did not hear from her until a month later when she called him at the office. She had a cousin who needed a job and thought he might help. That day, he asked her out for coffee and she agreed. After that, he took her home again but, this time, they ended up in bed. He became a regular visitor to the flat and even assumed the responsibility of paying its rent and utilities. A few months later, he convinced her to move into a new apartment on Lango Road. And so, their illicit union blossomed...

Amu lifted his head to discover that it was about seven o'clock in the evening. Thinking about Beth had driven him into somnolence. He stood up and stretched, noticing that the evening was quickly receding into darkness. It was time to go home. But, before he did so, he needed to talk to Beth and share his plans with her. A few rings on the phone brought her sweet voice to his ears. "Hello, Baby, it is me," he said, attempting to muster some seriousness.

Kizito remembered the events of the past two days with little remorse as he lay on his bed staging his usual protest to Susana's surreptitious demands for conjugal attention. His spirits were low and his thoughts unsettled. Now that Sembe had discussed the matter with Ayugi, there was no telling how far the matter would go. Throughout the day, he worried that perhaps Sembe had confronted Amu the previous night and even divulged the source of the information. Since Amu never said anything, it seems the woman was dealing with the issue without giving away her informers. This was reassuring. You just never know how philandering men may react to such things, he thought. He could even lose his job, not to mention how his involvement might be construed later, when the news hit the public domain.

Apart from the job, Kizito did not care very much about Amu. Sometimes, he thought of his boss as a lucky man who did not deserve all the good fortune that the Almighty had bestowed on him. But, the imbalance in their lives wasn't something new. Somehow, Amu had the better side of life. His father was a pastor, a well-respected elder, and they had a big farm. Kizito's father, Odindo, like many other villagers, worked on that farm as a labourer. Kizito remembered how, whenever his mother sent him with food to take to his father, he would stay a little longer to play with Amu. As a young boy, he was fascinated by Amu's pair of long trousers. He had always thought these were for adults only. Once, Amu let him wear them; he couldn't wait to tell his brothers and sisters.

But Amu wasn't as benevolent as he thought him to be. Unfortunately, this was something he was to know in adulthood. He remembered the day he started working at EAP. Amu haughtily introduced him to Sally and left him to learn, painstakingly, the operation of the company. He never told anybody of how close they were at home. And even when Amu asked him to set aside some money and attend extra training on his own, advice that seemed reasonable at the time, it was with such an air of arrogance and conceit that it drained all benevolence. When Susana came into his life, he literally had to beg Amu to assist him with transportation whenever he visited his in-laws' home. Amu accepted, but only to show everybody how rich and kind-hearted he was. Such a man did not deserve a good woman like Sembe, he thought as he drifted into slumber.

Chapter Two

IT WAS A Friday, about two months after Kizito's stunning revelations. Amu had come to the office anticipating a meeting with consultants from Techno Inc., a firm that had been helping his company to upgrade its quality systems. The reason for the meeting was to assess EAP's readiness in this regard. Since he was the chairman of the company's quality committee, it was his responsibility to ensure that the company got the most out of their consultants. This is why he arrived much earlier and was busy perusing the documents. But, when Sally called to inform him that Techno had called off the meeting, his mind relaxed and, immediately, he began thinking of the weekend. He had planned to leave work at noon, pick up Beth at her apartment on Lango Road and then head straight to Kentucky Fried Chicken in Westlands. After lunch, he would drop her off at Westlands Hospital for her appointment with the dentist. In the meantime, he would go to Rose Gardens shopping centre to pay her landlord the next month's rent. Thereafter, he would pick her up from the hospital and head straight to her apartment. On Saturday, they would go to Thompson Falls and spend the weekend at the exquisite Buffalo Lodge. On the home front, he informed his wife that he would be going on a company trip to Eldoret that Friday and would not return until Sunday. As far as she was concerned, he was free to go wherever he wanted provided he brought back beans and potatoes. On all counts, he was now a free soul, ready and willing to plunge into the sea of illicit romance.

When he called Beth at noon, she was ready and waiting. He hurriedly packed the few items he needed for the weekend and dashed out to the parking lot. The stench from a paper processing plant nearby and the peal of an old steel mill kept the atmosphere around the premises smelly and cacophonous. But it was the hot mid-day sun beating down upon the paved parking lot and draining the air around the compound of any feel of moisture that was most punishing. The heat had turned the inside of his car into a steamless

sauna, making him sweat profusely as he negotiated his way out of the lot. He drove down to the Fimbo Stadium roundabout and, instead of heading straight into town, he turned west toward Nyatta Hospital to avoid the lunchtime traffic. He reached Lango Road Apartments soon enough to suit his restless frame of mind. As he turned into the gravel driveway, he felt a rush of exhilaration charge through him. He stifled a sigh as the sentry opened the gate to admit his car into the complex. Beth walked down the stairs as soon as he edged the Volvo into a narrow parking space between the garbage bins and a pick-up truck.

"You made it so fast with the traffic," she said, while easing her body into the front seat.

He looked at her quizzically but with good regard. "I thought I might not find you if I didn't hurry," he responded. "You look wonderful."

"Thank you," she said, ignoring his other concern.

He was in high spirits, chatting incessantly as he drove along, cutting across Matatus, hooting behind pedestrians and taking turns carefully to avoid any collision. They crossed Gatanga Road and came to Waiyaki Way through Amboseli Road. They had their lunch at the Kentucky Fried Chicken on Chiromo Road and had time to pick out a few video cassettes from a rental store on Wescot Road. Everything looked fine until Amu realised that he had forgotten to bring along the money that he had withdrawn from the bank for the weekend. For all he could remember, the money was tucked away in his briefcase at the office. There was, also, the cashier's cheque for twenty-four thousand shillings that belonged to Beth's landlord. He decided that he would drop off Beth at the hospital and then rush back to his office in Industrial Area.

When he left Westlands Hospital, he took Forest Road intending to approach Industrial Area through Bondeni. His body was now succumbing to fatigue from the morning chores. He needed time to relax and the weekend rendezvous with his beloved Beth was just the right thing for him. His mind was still absorbed in anticipation when a sudden blaring horn of a Matatu jolted him. The Matatu whizzed past and suddenly stopped in front of him. By the time he realised that the Matatu was stationary, he couldn't possibly stop. He steered to the right in frenzy, but not before the left tip of his

bumper noisily scratched the right rear side of the Matatu. His Volvo shot across the next lane, missing the Nissan Kombi by a thread. It shuddered to the side of the road, smashed the kerb with a bang and came to a raucous stop.

Amu sat still in the car with his hands clutched to the wheel, unable to make sense of what had just happened. Within seconds, a gaggle of Matatu touts swarmed all over his car; some of them carrying heavy metal bars. They were yelling on top of their voices and blaming him for the accident. The police arrived shortly but, by the time they took the details of all the drivers, the road measurements and did all the sketches, it was almost a quarter to five. The evening traffic was beginning to build up. To add to his misery, the Matatu was found to have fake road and insurance stickers. Therefore, the police insisted that both vehicles and drivers must go to the station where things were even slower.

He left the station a few minutes before six o'clock. All in all, he managed to recover his money from the office and head back to Westlands. He found Beth waiting outside in the parking lot. The damage to the Volvo spoke for itself.

Amu might have thought that his weekend rendezvous was a matter known to him and Beth only. He was wrong. At about two o'clock, Ayugi's friend, Wangui, called to ask for a lift to see her aunt who was hospitalised in Westlands. Ayugi agreed to take her if the errand could end before six o'clock in the evening. Just as Amu was dropping Beth at the hospital, Ayugi and Wangui were coming out of the main entrance heading toward the parking lot. Ayugi saw the Volvo pass by and was keen to discern its occupants. When she saw the female passenger alighting, she was sure that the mystery of Beth was finally revealed.

Ayugi dropped off Wangui at the bus stop then returned to the parking lot. She squeezed the Suzuki into a small spot, three cars away from the gate, where she could see the drivers of the cars that entered the lot. She got out and ran to a telephone booth outside the entrance. Fortunately for her, Sembe was still in the office and she agreed to come right away. As Ayugi settled back into the car,

she wondered what could have propelled Amu to commit such an indiscretion. It saddened her that she should be the one to uncover Amu's adultery when she had defended him so unreservedly only a few weeks before. But she knew men to be reckless creatures who take intense pleasure in living dangerously. It was up to their women to beat them into shape; keep them within the limits of sanity. Amu's discovery today was certainly going to be the beginning of his learning, she thought.

At four o'clock, neither Sembe nor Amu had shown up. Ayugi was getting impatient. Beth had come out of the building and was now seated on the pavement. At about quarter to five, Sembe arrived by taxi. Ayugi was relieved. She quickly ushered her friend into the car and pointed in the direction of a light-complexioned woman with long hair who was now standing at the edge of the parking lot. Ayugi said, "That's her—Beth. That's her."

"Are you sure?" Sembe asked, still perplexed at the turn of events.

"That's her. Just wait a few minutes. You will see Amu come around."

"Are you sure about this, Ayugi?" Sembe insisted. "It can't be. Amu has just called me to say he is already on his way to Eldoret."

Ayugi, amused, said, "Hah! Eldoret, indeed!"

At about six o'clock, Amu came and Beth climbed into his car. He leaned over and kissed her cheeks before driving off.

Sembe was shocked and, for a while she didn't say a word. When she recovered, she started to cry. "I am leaving him. I can't live with a philandering husband. I have seen it with my own eyes."

"What do you mean, leave him?" Ayugi inquired, obviously distressed by her friend's hasty resolve. "If it were for the sake of leaving him, I would never have asked you to come. And please stop crying."

"But how can anybody deal with such a thing?"

"You adjust. That is all. You adjust and become tough. A woman must defend her turf and she does so with knowledge and tact, not grief," Ayugi replied curtly.

"What turf? I ask you, Ayugi, what turf?" Sembe sobbed. "Amu has destroyed our marriage. I cannot have him anymore, which is why today I am leaving him. He can have his woman for all I care. I will divorce him."

Ayugi was valiant. “You cannot leave him, Sem! You love him. Moreover, this is a battle that we will win and Amu will respect you and love you more than you have ever known,” Ayugi said.

“It is comforting for you to see it as a battle. I don’t.”

“You have stuck with him all these years. You cannot give up on account of such occasional foibles now.”

Overcoming aversion to her friend’s overwhelming grief, Ayugi decided to follow the Volvo. Silence gripped them, each retreating to her own thoughts. The Volvo turned left onto Lango Road and then right toward a big metal gate. The sentry approached the driver but then turned back to talk to the woman in the passenger seat. He then hurriedly opened the gate and the vehicle disappeared into the apartment complex. Ayugi and Sembe waited for about thirty minutes and then drove away.

That night, Sembe was sleepless. She tossed and turned, her heart mourning the lost dreams of a perfect marriage. All she could think about was her husband and the tall woman sleeping together throughout the weekend. With tears streaming uncontrollably down her sodden face, she tried to reach for the bedside drawer to get a handkerchief, but realised that she was sleeping on his side of the bed. She shifted her body to her side but felt too tired to reach for the drawer. She remembered that before she married Amu, his kindness and generosity were all too overwhelming. Though a little too flexible and ready to do anything she asked, without grumbling, she sometimes thought he lacked the aggressiveness that, in her youthful fantasy, was considered the essence of masculinity. But she never thought of him as being capable of cheating. She had put too much trust in him, their marriage and in family. And now, all her dreams of a perfect marriage were suddenly becoming just that, mere dreams. But why was Amu cheating on her? Was it something that she did that sent him into the arms of another woman? Why were men in her life ending up the same way? She had the same problem with Tom Tunde, her first boyfriend, and now, with her husband. What was it about her that made her men untrustworthy?

From the days of her youth, she had always been indignant about the idea of sharing her man with another woman. This is why when she suspected that Tom was cheating on her, she went to great lengths to uncover the truth. Indeed, when she finally caught him in bed with her classmate, Emma, she immediately severed the relationship. Tonight, she was feeling exactly the same as she did that Wednesday afternoon fifteen years ago. Tom could have slept with anybody but not her classmate, especially Emma. That night, she packed his few belongings that were in her room and took them to Rogers, his cousin. She wrote a short note to him, two sentences actually, informing him that their relationship had come to an end for reasons well within his knowledge. Though Tom made innumerable pleas for forgiveness, putting all blame on Emma, she refused to accept him back. His attempts to save their relationship were less aided by his drunken behaviour, her pride and by the entry of Amu onto the scene.

In the aftermath of her affair with Tom, she hated all men, seeing in them the male chauvinist trait that made them arrogant and insensitive to women. She started to avoid the social company of men. She turned down all requests to join her friends in their revelry at Revival, the famous disco joint on Swansea Street, if any of them had male company. This is why, when Amu first asked her for a dance at that party in Langata, she flatly refused. But, Amu eventually wore her down in a way that can only be described as magical. Her feelings for him must have been ignited by their encounter that November evening when she visited his High End house for the first time. That was exactly four months after the Tom debacle. It was all a coincidence though. That night, he had driven her back to college and she invited him to visit whenever he pleased. Little did she know that it was to be the beginning of a roller coaster ride into a heady and bountiful relationship that not only culminated in a marriage two years later, but also three beautiful children.

Perhaps the most valuable consequence of her marriage to Amu was the blessing of children. Her three daughters were the centre of her life. It made her sad that he was jeopardising his life in a way that was going to affect the children. She was well aware of how the girls adored their father. Even in a time of great exasperation, there was always the welcoming look of joy on their faces when

their father came home. He reciprocated by being absent from home and coming in late every night. She was left to bear the burden of raising them alone, a task which was sometimes overwhelming and frustrating. But she never complained. She told herself that a man needs freedom and that a woman has to make sacrifices for a family to grow. She persevered through the loneliness and the worry whenever he was late or was away on a trip. What a waste that was!

As she thought about her children, she knew the time had certainly come when she would have to make some very important decisions. One thing was clear in her mind—the issue between her and Amu was grave enough to bring the marriage to an end. She couldn't continue living with him if he was involved with another woman and was bold enough to display his love for her openly. She decided to leave him for good—no matter what became of her children. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she cried until her tired body gave in to the tender arms of slumber.

When she awoke on Saturday morning, the room was bright with the morning sunlight. The girls had descended on her bedroom with all sorts of paraphernalia, ranging from toys to clothes and shoes. She heaved her tired body and sat up. The girls reacted to her movement as though that was the first time they were seeing her. It was Val, the youngest one, who was closest to her. "Mummy," she called out and threw herself at her. This must have called the others to attention. Lisa was switching television channels with the remote control. Anna was at her dressing table, playing with her make-up.

"Mummy, Daddy called this morning and he said he will be home tomorrow," Lisa shouted from the corner of the room. "He told us not to wake you if you were asleep."

"Mummy...when will I wear my new dress?" Anna asked. "Can I wear it to church tomorrow?"

"I want a dress like Anna's. Mummy, when will you buy one for me?" Val begged.

By now, all of them were crowding her on the bed and competing for her attention. She felt a slight headache and nausea. She wanted to go to the bathroom.

"Hey, girls, I am feeling sick. Please go downstairs and have your breakfast."

"We already had our breakfast," they replied in unison.

"Then go and play outside, all of you. I want to sleep for a while," she said dismissing the children.

As they grudgingly left the room, she looked at the clock on the wall. It was ten thirty, but she did not feel like getting out of bed. Compelled to do so by the call of nature, she rose from the bed and stumbled to the bathroom. On her way back, she peeked in the mirror to convince herself that she was still alive. Her face and hair were terrible but she did not care. Who would care about looks when hopes and dreams for the future seemed hopeless? Even as she staggered back to bed, the picture of Amu kissing that woman still played in her mind, evoking a thick feeling of abhorrence. Bracing herself for the difficult time ahead, she wiped the tears from her face and pulled the blankets over her head.

The day melted like a piece of butter in a hot saucepan. Ayugi did not come and she did not call. But this did not bother her. After all, she needed to be alone to think the matter through. By nightfall, she had firmly decided to live separately from him. She was relieved to have made a decision although less sanguine whether it was the right one. There were, indeed, many things at stake and the fear that she had not accounted for all of them was disheartening. Perhaps the torrents of anecdotes would begin as soon as she settled into a new life. But she couldn't take care of everything, which was why separation was a painful choice. Then, she decided there was no need to wait for Amu to come home before executing her resolve. She would pack her things and move out of Kileleshwa the next day.

Her next problem was where to go. She knew very well that everybody would expect her to go to her brother's place in Kambilamoshi. But, at this stage, she did not want too much involvement of family members. She needed to be alone for a while. Other than the dingy hotels on River Road, she knew of only one other place where she could get accommodation at a reasonable price—the Christian Youth Hostels (CYH) near the University of Nairobi. Although she had never lived there, she had often taken her daughters to its swimming pool and health club. She liked the area and was always impressed by the general upkeep of the property. Also, the hostels were right in town, in close proximity to everything she might need. When she made a call to the hostel, there were a few vacant rooms. She booked one and confirmed that she would be there the next day.

Chapter Three

THE CAR SCREECHED as Amu turned into his driveway. He eased the brakes and accelerated slightly past the gate, waving lazily to the daytime security guard who stood with his arms akimbo, waiting for the Volvo to pass. He parked the vehicle in front of the garage. It was Sunday morning so his family must have gone to church, he thought. What a relief it was not to find Sembe at home! He removed his briefcase as Odongo, the houseboy, arrived. He pointed to the trunk, signalling that there were more items in there for him to carry. He used the garage door to enter the house. When inside the living room, he flung off his shoes and sauntered towards the plush sofa. He removed his jacket and tossed it on the seat as he let his tired body sink into the softness of the cushions. At that moment, all the notions of his wildly exciting love affair came rushing back and he thought in ludicrous and grandiose terms of the great wheel of fate that had brought him and Beth together. In some strange way, the feeling had been invigorated by the absence of Sembe. He stretched his right arm and picked up the phone, which he held to his cheek while dialling Beth's number. "I am home and bored already," he said, while fondling the gadget as though it were the person to whom he was talking. Whatever the response, he smiled, "See you soon. Love you!" He replaced the receiver. Instantly, he was reminded of the two nights they spent together. Waking up each morning, her soft body cuddled beside his, her warm breath on his chest and the sweet scent of her hair tantalising his nose. If that experience wasn't the epitome of a man's happiness, then he surely did not know what happiness means.

Indulging himself to a little more time to relax, he removed his socks, propped his legs in a comfortable position and then, with his left hand, gathered up the bunch of letters that were lying on the table next to him. He flipped through the envelopes, noticing that

most of them were utility bills and information from the school that his daughters attended. Others were addressed to Sembe. Without bothering to open any, he returned the letters to where he had found them, reclined his head on the sofa and closed his eyes.

He must have been asleep for about two hours because when he woke up, Odongo was setting the table for lunch and the teapot on the coffee table next to him was cold. He stood up and stretched. But, before he could resume his siesta, Odongo emerged from the kitchen, holding a plate of Ugali.

"Janam, where is everybody?" he asked.

"*Mama* left very early this morning. She said when you come, I should tell you that she has gone out and that there is a letter for you on the bed," he replied.

"How about Lisa and the others?"

"They went to church. Lisa said she would visit a friend and come home late. Anna was to go with her. *Nyar gi Japuonj* is asleep. She was complaining of a headache last night."

"Hmmmm. Did *Mama* say what time she would be back?"

"Not exactly. I noticed that she carried a lot of things. It was as though she was going on a safari. She told me that if you don't come today, I should fetch you tomorrow at the office for my salary and groceries."

"Okay, Janam."

Odongo made as if he was going to the kitchen, but spun around. "And Uncle Janabi also came from home."

"Janabi? When did he come?"

"Friday morning."

"Is he in the guest room?"

"No. He left early in the morning. He went to see somebody in Ndondosha."

Amu wondered what Sembe could have written to him about. Despite fatigue and the inclination to pass the afternoon lying down, he rose up and hurried upstairs. The bedroom door was ajar and things in it were completely jumbled up. The bedspread was thrown over the unmade bed while sheets, clothing, papers and even books were scattered in all directions. The red lace brassiere and matching thong panties that he had bought for Sembe two months ago, were lying on the floor. He picked these up, folded them slowly then

tucked them away in the bedside chest. The wardrobe doors were wide open as though somebody had been in a rush to remove things. On the bed, was a letter which he hurriedly picked up. The handwriting was Sembe's and the message, short and precise. *I am leaving you and I will be back to fetch my things.*

Kambilamoshi was one of the oldest housing estates in Nairobi. Although primarily meant for the rank and file of the Railway Corporation, its proximity to the city made it attractive, even to the middle level managers. James Okola, Amu's brother-in-law, had lived there for as long as Amu had known him. His house was next to the police station, just a few metres from Gojo Road. As Amu approached the house, he saw Okola emerging from the house with a bottle of beer in his hand. "Welcome! Welcome, Ori!" Okola shouted as Amu came out of the car.

"Thank you," Amu replied. "I was just in the neighbourhood so I thought I should pass by and say hello."

Gladys, Okola's wife, appeared almost immediately. She was tall and slender, and looked rather young for her age. She had a light complexion, small eyes and a very thin neck that somehow magnified the size of her head. She had a warm personality and was obviously happy to see Amu. Gladys and he went back a long time. In the days when he was wooing Sembe, she was always ready to assist him. But her efforts were not without reward. Her brother found a job with EAP through his assistance, and she never missed money to spend whenever she was on a mission—his mission. Gladys greeted him and offered him a beer, which he gratefully accepted. As he settled into the drink, he kept wondering what Sembe's complaint was this time. Of course, she had done this before—run to her brother's house when there was a disagreement. The last time she did this, however, he came and fetched her but not before Okola and other relatives of hers gave him lengthy admonition. She seemed to be at it again. He was convinced that Sembe was somewhere in the house, just waiting for an opportune time to come out and confront him. This is why he was surprised when Gladys asked him where his wife was.

“She went to church,” he quickly lied.

“But she had promised to come visit us today,” Gladys insisted.

“Well, perhaps she is on her way. When I left home, she and the children were not back from church.”

It was apparent that Sembe had not been there. Believing it to be of little use to alert everybody of his predicament, he excused himself and left.

He came back home at six o'clock and went straight to the bedroom. Now, he noticed that most of Sembe's clothes were missing. She had also taken her shoes, handbags, bottles of perfume and other small personal items. Also missing was her graduation photograph which, hitherto, had hung conspicuously on the wall facing the door. Two suitcases were missing from the rack above the wardrobe frame and so were her accessories. Suddenly, he was hit by the raw reality of his wife having left him without giving him any notice. He flung his body onto the bed, his clothes and shoes intact, and covered himself with the quilted bedcover that Cosmas had given them on their tenth anniversary. He thought of how his life had been transformed. He thought of his parents and how the divorce, if indeed it did occur, would affect them. His father, a Seventh Day Adventist pastor, believed that people divorce because they are weak and Non-Christian. Considering all of what was happening right now, this interpretation was holding true; Sembe was weak and he was Non-Christian in his conduct.

His thoughts were transported to the day he first met her and how her beauty had captivated him. It was at a party in Langata, some eight kilometres from High End where he lived at the time. Cosmas, his room-mate and he had been invited by Naomi Ogot, then a student at the University of Nairobi. Naomi and Cosmas spent a lot of time together and, despite Cosmas's persistent denial, he seemed quite fond of her. They had arrived when the party was already in full swing. Inside, Amu lurked so inconspicuously in a corner, hoping that neither Naomi nor Cosmas would look for him. He noticed that guests were mingling inside and outside the rooms on either side of the hall. The music was loud and people were dancing on the floor. Beer and other beverages were being served in the opposite corner. Cosmas mingled comfortably as he seemed to know the majority of the guests. As he sat dejected, Amu couldn't

help noticing that many of the men were chasing after Naomi for a dance. They were obviously interested in more than the flippant affection that defined his relationship with her. He couldn't blame them. She was a beautiful woman. How he wished she were his. He would never treat her as badly as Cosmas did.

Besides Naomi, there were many beautiful women at the party, but all of them must have come with their boyfriends, he thought. While surveying the events and the people around him, he couldn't help but notice the sartorial splendour of the women. He couldn't recollect, from any recent memory, having been to a place or function with such a vast number of elegant women. While a few were on the dance floor swinging their hips to the tempo of the music, the majority were either standing in groups, engaged in light talk with friends, or sitting down on the few chairs that lined one side of the wall. Among those who were seated, was one particular girl who seemed absorbed in her own thoughts. Her face was slightly hidden by the latest fad in glasses, silver-rimmed and so flattering that Amu couldn't fathom the beauty of the eyes behind them. When she rose to talk to the DJ, Amu watched her swinging hips and was tantalised by her elegant figure. She wore an expensive leather jacket over a tight, revealing white T-shirt that clung to her curves so intimately that the nipples of her breasts were discernible. The tight blue jeans moulding her *derrière* perfectly and the stiletto shoes highlighting her feet, all enhanced her sensual appeal. She moved easily and indolently. The blue and white combination certainly suited her. Her face, barely visible, was extremely pretty and she had long black hair that was held by a thin band. She carried a small black bag while her oversized gold earrings twinkled in the dim disco lights.

Despite her compelling appearance, Amu made a hasty decision not to show any interest in her. He tried to marshal his thoughts and convince himself that his life was perfect even without a girlfriend. But the girl's beauty tore his heart out of such contentment, revealing instead, a depth of emptiness and longing that he had never experienced before. For a while, he was in a state of bliss and kept staring blankly as though in a trance. But, he couldn't go on gawking at her all evening, especially with the emotional turbulence that was building within him. He needed to

be a little practical if he ever aspired to see this beauty again. He fully realised that it was an audacious undertaking that risked failure, but his emotional distress was so overwhelming, that he could hardly think of anything else. Propelled by the force of attraction, he approached her seat and politely asked for a dance. She raised her head and looked at him for about five seconds as though assessing his worth and then she said, “No.” Amu felt embarrassed and a little annoyed at the blatant cold shoulder. He stood beside her for a moment not knowing how to deal with the rejection. He wondered whether it was the beauty or the fact that she was in college that was the source of such impudence. Normal people usually afford strangers some degree of civility, even in the manner of declining a request.

Suddenly, somebody touched him on the back. On turning his head, it was Naomi. “I am asking whether I may have a dance with him—that is if you don’t mind, Sembe,” she said, looking at the woman.

“It is fine,” the woman responded as Naomi held out her hand for Amu. They edged their way through a mass of human beings who neither resisted nor moved, pushing on until they found an empty spot on the dance floor. She put her hands on his shoulders as their bodies swung to the rhythm of the music.

“Do you two know each other?” she inquired with an adoring grin on her face.

“No.”

“Sure?”

“Yeah, what do you think?”

“I thought I saw you talking to her.”

“Yeah, right. I asked her for a dance and you know what...she turned me down, so let’s just skip the subject.”

Naomi did not skip the subject. She told Amu just about everything that he did not want to hear at that particular time. The girl’s name was Sembe. She was a “Boxer”, meaning a university student. Yes, she had a boyfriend, a bloke by the name of Tom. He was a recent graduate and the son of John Tunde, a rich and famous Homa Bay wholesaler. He had a good import and export business, two cars, one of which was a Mitsubishi Pajero, and he had only recently bought a house in South C estate. Tom was tall, lean and very handsome. Whenever he came to campus, most girls would

throw themselves at him. He had a lot of money and liked his booze. It was said, though Naomi wasn't certain, that he and Sembe were having problems. The rumour was that he was seeing another girl.

Despite everything going against him, Naomi suggested that he should not give up, if he was really interested. "I could help," she said.

"I am not interested so let's not even waste time talking about it," he retorted emphatically.

But Amu wasn't honest with himself. The fleeting encounter with the girl's beauty wasn't giving his emotional sense any respite. The earlier rejection notwithstanding, her manner fascinated rather than repelled him, making him altogether curious. He kept glancing at her whenever he had the chance, but made sure that Naomi did not notice. He still yearned for her acquaintance even though this did not seem to be even remotely feasible. Deep inside him, he wondered whether there would ever come a time when a woman's love could be conquered by anything other than vanity and money.

The night could have passed as an excruciatingly boring one if Naomi did not invite him to dine with her friends at some point during the party. He followed her against the stream of chattering and gesticulating men and women to a picturesque wooden door that separated the living room from the inner rooms. Behind the door, the atmosphere was an eclectic mix of an after church vestry, an end of the month *Chibuku* party in Kabangi Estate and a meeting of soccer fans after a victorious game. They proceeded into one of the bedrooms where selected guests were being served with huge mounds of *Pilau*, *Chapati* and meats. There were six girls in the room, all of them young, reasonably attractive and radiating that ineffable but unmistakable air of college arrogance and conceit. Among them was Sembe, calm, sure and with looks that enhanced her appeal. She had a face that wasn't only adorable to look at but vital and compelling enough to live for. As the food was being served, the room was engulfed in chatter on many subjects. Sembe was talking about the old Congolese music, which still had some appeal among young people. Her words did not match her attitude. "I used to have one cassette and I think Tom lost it," she said.

"My boyfriend does not like African. He only listens to funky hip hop and those American things...you know. Sometimes, he is very boring," another girl was saying.

"I have quite a collection of the Franco and *Kwasa Kwasa* music. I like them a lot," Amu interjected innocently.

"That's right, Amu, you have a lot of those. Isn't that so, Cosmas?" Naomi said. "Hey, people, this is Amu. He is Cosmas's roommate," Naomi said, pointing to Amu.

A lot of talk followed and, at the end of it, Amu promised Sembe that he would record some music and pass it to her through Naomi. "That would be very nice of you," she said. His accumulated gloom dissipated in a moment.

That night, he decided not to go to bed until he had assembled all the music he intended to pass on to her. But even after he did this, he couldn't get her off his mind. For the first time in his life, something had gripped his sense of being and made him realise that love exists. He knew he wanted her more than he had ever wanted any woman in his entire life. He remembered her voice, her smile, her body and even her perfume. He wanted very much to see her again although the prospect didn't look so good. The girl had a boyfriend who wasn't just anybody. He remembered his primary school teacher's advice: "Always cut your frock according to your size." The problem was that Mister Olande, the said teacher, never lived according to his teachings. Everybody in the village knew that he never paid his debts. The local *Chang'aa* brewers as well vegetable vendors were always looking for him at work. When he was finally transferred to another school, he left in the middle of the night to avoid confronting his creditors. But, Mister Olande was different from most people. He did not have a lover so he probably could never fathom the limitations of his decree.

He had drifted in and out of sleep, the double-bed feeling large and empty. Rolling onto his back, he stared at the ceiling that was barely lit by the street lamps across the road. Randomly anxious about a woman's love, he gave himself up to the sweet recollection of his encounter with Sembe—the beauty, smile and the love. If only she would be welcoming to his advances; if only she would agree to share in his world of romance. If only...if only...When that day comes, he would be ready. He had it all planned. He would take it slow and easy, one step at a time; may be a little romance for a start, perhaps with flowers, elegant dinners, dancing and a lot of visits. Then, move into physical expression of affection and, perhaps,

even marriage if everything worked out. He had passed the night in a state of misery and abject longing. He hated himself for being at the mercy of emotions—emotions that were so intense, obsessive and, ultimately, overpowering...

But that was the past. Now, he lay on his bed wondering whether the marriage he had so carefully planned and executed was coming to an end. What became of the love that he nurtured with so much dedication and what of the woman in whom he had invested so much? What became of the trust, hope and the conviviality of their union? The reality of his situation was pathetic. His marriage was in trouble and, indeed, as matters stood, he would be quite happy with some space away from Sembe. Accomplishing something one always wanted can expose the chasm between perception and reality. He had wanted Sembe so much and had gone to great lengths to win her heart, always believing that nothing worth having was easy. When he found her and kept her, things turned out differently. Perhaps, that was the destiny of mankind—that a perfect state of things will always be a mirage, always on the horizon, never to be reached. He remembered a preacher once saying, that human beings struggle to accomplish a goal, but that goal never satisfies their want for more. How could he have known that human beings were in a constant struggle—a flight towards the impossible and the betrayals, the disappointments and envy were all just part of the game?

The phone rang. Thinking that it was his wife, Amu jumped out of the bed, picked up the receiver and said, “Hello.” Somebody had already picked it up. “Daddy, put down the receiver. It is for me,” Lisa shouted from downstairs. Feeling disappointed, he pulled himself out of the bed and sat down. He then remembered that Val, his younger daughter, had not been feeling well. He strode towards her bedroom, only to find her playing near the door. When she saw him, she stood up quickly and ran to his arms. “Daddy, do you know I have been sick?” she asked.

“Yes, I came to see you this morning and I found you asleep.”

“No, Daddy, that is not true. I wasn’t asleep. I was too sick to sleep. Didn’t Mummy tell you?” He wasn’t in a mood for any rendezvous with this inquisitive little person. He put her down and asked her to check whether supper was ready. She ran downstairs.

Amu did not feel hungry despite not having eaten lunch. He wondered where his wife could have gone. He decided to call all relatives and friends, one by one, to inquire. But he would have to wait until Lisa was off the phone. He decided to make a list in the meantime. He went through his back pocket and removed his notebook. Using a pencil he found on Sembe's dressing table, he began listing the names and telephone numbers. He noticed that he had not spoken to some of them for well over a year. What would he tell them? Then, he remembered that his wife was gone for only half a day. Probably, she might come back. He dropped the idea and, instead, removed a bottle of whiskey that had been lying in the television closet. He poured himself a drink. The smell of the whiskey hit his nostrils and he winced a little. "Gosh," he muttered, obviously surprised at its strength. It was a while since he had last drunk whiskey. Beer was his drink of choice. Holding the glass in one hand and the bottle in the other, he wandered about the room going nowhere in particular.

As he sipped the warm drink, he felt some measure of freedom. *By the way, you could never have alcohol in Queen Sembe's bedroom, no matter who you were!* No wonder the whiskey had stayed for that long without being consumed. For a moment, he did not resent his circumstances. He strode around the bedroom, breathing in the odourless air as if it was invigorating. The calm exhilaration of the evening and the sip of whiskey gave him an unaccustomed peace of mind; contentment with things the way they were and a certain modest feeling of victory over a formidable opponent. The desolation he felt early in the afternoon was gradually dissipating with the realisation that Sembe's departure had simplified his existence; removed from it a persistent cause of irritation which he could very well do without.

Now that the queen had gone into self-imposed exile, the subject could enjoy his drink. He poured himself another glass of whiskey to celebrate his freedom. By two o'clock in the morning, the bottle was empty and Amu could barely lift his hands. In his hallucinations, he could see Sembe moving around the bedroom. She stopped by his side looking disgusted, and then asked him to get out of the room because he smelled of alcohol. "Shut up, you woman, today I will show you that I am Amu, the son of the soil," he yelled at the

top of his voice. “You educated women think that you can treat us like dirt. I am a rich man and I don’t care about you.” Suddenly, he swung his hand as if to hit somebody and his whole body heaved out of the sofa onto the floor.

The Christian Youth Hostels (CYH) parking lot was unusually full for a Sunday morning. Sembe edged her Toyota between the Nissan Caravan and the slick BMW on the far eastern end of the lot. She removed her bags and walked across the lot to a narrow brick promenade, shielded on both sides by a labyrinth of trees and flowers that led directly to the main building. The attendant emerged from the opposite room where people were talking in loud voices. She had booked in advance so the check-in formalities did not take long. The attendant walked her to a room on the second floor, which had a twin bed with a *Silent Night* mattress, a small velvet chair behind a cypress reading table and comfy rug was spread on the floor. The room was self-contained, with a bathroom, a toilet and a small built-in wardrobe. She placed her bag on the bed and walked over to inspect the bathroom. It was good enough for the moment, given that her plans were still in the air. She glanced through the window and saw the University of Nairobi buildings. She wondered how long it had been since she was a student there. She wondered, too, how easy life had been then. If you were dissatisfied with a relationship, all you had to do was walk away from it. It was fashionable or even heroic for a girl to dismiss a boyfriend and end the relationship. Then, there were no children to think about or relatives to appease. It was you and you alone to chart the destiny of your life. How she wished for things to revert to the way they were! She could have kicked him out of her room and thrown his belongings into the hallway.

She retreated to the bed and rested her head on the pillow. When Kizito informed her about Beth two weeks ago, she tried all she could to be close to her husband. Her hope was that things would get better. Apparently, nothing changed. Were there things that she did not do or things that she did wrong? Did Amu really love her the way he had confessed a number of times? She was pained by

the thought of a relationship so cruel, so one-sided, and so wantonly parasitic. She thought of how often Amu had hurt her, physically, morally and mentally. How often had she been told hurtful, deceptive lies by one calling himself a husband? She felt an overwhelming sense of helplessness. "Oh, Amu, I love you so much...but you hurt me so much. Damn you! Damn you... Damn you Amu... What is happening to my life? My God, I am going to die... Jesus, help me..." She started crying. Her body heaved and swayed with unrestrained anguish, throwing the bed sheets and blanket to the floor. When her body could take it no more, she curled up and lay on the bare mattress, tightly squeezing the thin pillow close to her.

A furtive knock on the door woke her up. It was the matron bringing a clean pair of bed sheets, towels and toiletries. Unable to conceal her sullen mood, Sembe asked her to put the items on the table. As the matron turned to leave, she must have noticed that she had been crying because, in a few minutes, she was back with a pot of hot tea and an egg sandwich.

"I noticed that you did not eat breakfast so I made you some tea," the lady said. "Come on, get off the bed and have some."

As Sembe hobbled her weak body to the wooden chair, the lady went into her bathroom and brought out a hot face towel. She helped her to wipe her face and poured hot tea into a cup.

"You are in bad shape, my daughter, so you must surely drink something—and I will see to it that you do." She handed the cup of tea to Sembe.

Sembe took the cup with her hands shaking. She sipped a little and felt the warm liquid go down to her empty belly. The tea was good. She took a huge breath and said, "Thank you, Ma'am." But the lady was already outside the door.

Her thoughts drifted back to her problems. She thought about Beth. What was so special about this woman that a man could decide to ruin his family to have her? Now that she had seen her at close range, she remembered having met her at a seminar in January, at the Jambo Jambo Park Hotel. She remembered how the girl kept looking at her during the seminar. Coming face to face with a woman whose husband you are sleeping with must have fascinated her and that is why she even had the guts to chat to her. Beth delightfully took advantage of her ignorance and heaped scorn on her. How she

hated her! The seminar was to be followed by a late evening reception, which she did not attend. She had pleaded with Amu to take her but, somehow, he managed to wiggle out of it. Now, it was apparent that he knew his girlfriend was going to be there.

What would she do? With no ready answer coming to mind, she picked up the teapot and the cup then put them outside the door. She locked the door and threw herself on the bed. She started crying again. Her chin sank low as she wondered what had made her set out this morning with such confidence to end her marriage. Why had she not been content to rebuke her husband, draw solace from it and impress on him the need to spend more time with his family? What madness had drawn her out to undertake a journey into what could only be a disaster? She blamed herself for not trying hard enough, even after Kizito had alerted her to what was going on. Instead, she had persisted with her anger and distrust. Had she taken Ayugi's advice, she could have changed her approach to the relationship. She should have avoided any open quarrel with him and tried as much as possible to be available for all his demands. But how much was a woman expected to give so that a marriage survives?

Chapter Four

AMU WOKE UP to find himself on the floor. Beside him, the empty bottle of whiskey stood like an invincible wrestler, beckoning a weak opponent. The contents of that bottle had subdued him—wrestled him to the ground and sat on him for the rest of the night. And even now, as he struggled to regain control of his hashed faculties, the aftermath of it all tugged along painful reminiscences and a biting hangover. The only claim he could make to sanity was a hunched body piqued by an incessantly pounding headache and shamelessly lying on the floor one foot away from a double sized bed. Even after he dragged his pitiful body to the edge of the bed and sat down with his face in his hands, still he couldn't muster enough strength to remove his shoes or reach for a bottle of tablets that Sembe kept in one of the bedside drawers. Everything seemed so distant and unreachable, even rest. He should have known better than to touch that drink, especially now that he needed all the sobriety and vitality he could squeeze out of his constricted life. Maybe, it was the loneliness brought about by his wife's departure that had set him on a voyage to self-destruction. But this, he doubted. Last night, he had the rarest feeling of freedom, something he had not experienced in a long time. The more he thought about his present condition, the more his confusion grew and, in the end, he couldn't decide whether to blame it on Sembe or the whiskey.

The sag with which the morning had begun was something he felt in his bones. In the past, he could have rushed to Beth's place and sprawled his body on the bed, letting her soft hands massage all the muscles and curves of his body. Today, he had neither the strength nor the urge to venture outside his bedroom, let alone drive all the way to Lango Road. He pulled himself to the bed and slid both his feet between the sheets. It was quiet except for the ticking of his wristwatch, which was showing the time to be ten o'clock.

He remembered that there was supposed to be a meeting in the office. He lifted his body to reach for the bedside' phone but he couldn't. A sharp pain shot through his back to his left arm making him squeal. He recoiled, allowing his left arm to rest flabbily on the bed. A few minutes later, he heard footsteps climbing up the stairs. It was Odongo coming to inform him that Kioko, the company driver who sometimes doubled as his personal assistant, was downstairs. He grimaced at the thought of having to go down to the living room so his mind scrambled for an alternative. "Janam, can you ask him to come up here after about ten minutes?" he said. Odongo nodded and dashed out.

Amu dragged himself to the bathroom and washed his face. Back in his bedroom, he sat on the sofa, took a pencil and began noting down some things. Kioko came in momentarily, clad in a blue suit, polished black shoes, a white shirt and a matching company tie. He was a short man, sparsely built, with a thatch of well-groomed hair combed backwards. His eyes, small and piercing, were set in a round charming face that was perpetually eager to please. He was a good and affable man and was utterly devoted to Amu. Although originally from Kitui, Kioko spent a large part of his life in Kisumu, working for Kenya Posts and Telecommunications Corporation. He relocated to Nairobi when EAP hired him. He had been with the company for ten years now, but only three with the production department. During this time, he had become a true companion to Amu, almost like a member of his family.

"The meeting did not take place because you and Mr Groningen were not there," Kioko told him when he asked about the goings-on at the office. "I was told Mr Groningen was still in Malindi. I called here and Odongo told me you were not feeling well so I came to check on you."

"Yes, Kioko, I am not feeling well."

"*Pole*, sir."

"It is good you came. I would like you to tell Sally that I am not coming today. Ask her to give you the minutes of the last committee meeting. Also, ask her to call Dr Owino and make an appointment for me at one o'clock. I expect you here before that time so that you can take me there."

"I will do so, Sir," he responded.

“Can you check with Odongo to see whether there is anything they need from town? If there is nothing, then I will expect you at about midday.”

“Okay, Sir,” Kioko said and left.

Stretching on the bed, he thought about Sembe. In any other circumstance, he could be appalled by her decision to leave home, and maybe, even ponder about the source of her indignation. But the way things were, her unilateral decision was probably serving both their interests. Now, he was feeling more in control of his home and it suited him just fine. He resolved not to look for her any further than he had done and smiled at the possibility of Beth replacing her forever. Perhaps, it was now necessary to change all the locks and the security arrangements so that Sembe stays out of his life forever.

By evening, Kioko had helped him to run all the errands of the day. He saw Dr Owino who gave him something for his arm, passed by the supermarket and did a little grocery shopping and even found time for a little nap. When he woke up, he felt a little strange, as though he were going through some kind of withdrawal. Outside, the weather looked gloomy—a sign that a storm was coming. He moved to the sofa next to his bed and switched on the television set. On Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), the government channel, they were talking about the prospects of the merger of two political parties. While the event did stir a lot of interest in the nation’s political arena, it did not, in the least, feature prominently in Amu’s world. To him all the politicians were alike—the opposition as well as those in the ruling party. So how would it matter that the two were joining forces? The image of a leading *Luo* politician flashed onto the screen. “We are saying that we have done sufficient *consultation* and are now ready for a joint delegates’ conference. This will be a historic *ocason*,” he said. The same politician had once cursed the ruling party’s politicians and vowed to prosecute every single one of them for corruption, if and when he would come to power. The whole madness in Kenya’s politics was unbelievable. He changed the channel to Kenya Television Services (KTS). The documentary on tourism sponsored by Kenya Airways was just ending but not before splashing on the screen a picture of bikini-clad women on the sunny beaches of Mombasa. He switched off the television set, sank in the chair and closed his eyes.

The creak and bang of the gate awoke him. In a while, he heard Janabi's voice. Janabi was a teacher from his village and a friend of the family. His frequent journeys to Nairobi were to check one or two things at his employer's head office. Unlike many people from Amu's village, he wasn't an Adventist. In fact, he loathed the denomination with a passion despite his elder wife being one of the church leaders. As far as he was concerned, they were pretenders. He particularly hated Barnabas Ong'ele, one of the deacons of the local church. "You would rather be confronted by eight hyenas in the middle of the night than by Barnabas at midday," he would blithely warn. According to him, Barnabas had bewitched many people in the village, robbed widows of their land and worst of all, he was connected to cattle theft in the region. "Yet, every Saturday, he is in church singing *Tukutendereza Yesu*." One would be amazed at the alacrity with which such grave allegations were uttered. But that was Janabi, never missed a chance to make humour of every situation.

For obvious reasons, Janabi was never close to Amu's father. According to Jakwath Patroba, Janabi had never grown up. "He is still a child," he would say. Janabi did nothing to improve his relationship with Amu's parents. He seemed content that Amu and Sembe considered him a worthy friend. When everybody in the village was castigating him for lack of foresight when he married his third wife, Sembe even sent him some money to help him pay the bride price. He made no secret of this fact, much to the revulsion of Amu's parents.

"*Japuonj*, you have come to see us," Amu said as he greeted him with an aggressive handshake.

"Yes, *Jatelo*. I came yesterday but had to dash off to Ndondosha to go and see my son, Maira. News reached us that he was sick so his mother did not give me rest until I decided to come," he said with disquiet.

"How is he?" Amu asked.

"I looked for him for two days but did not see him. I found a woman at his house, a *Kikuyu* lady, who told me that she is his wife. She said something like he went to Meru on a job—anyway, a long story."

"Then, he is not as sick as they said?"

"Not at all, and that's strange. I hate to come this far for nothing."

“Eh, it is not for nothing. At least you have seen us and we love you around here. You know that. Moreover, this is your home. Visit anytime, you don’t need a reason.”

This was true. Janabi had always adored Amu and his family. If the truth were told, he had never experienced anything like them. They were warm and loving and, to them, he was always a special guest. Whenever he was around, he occupied the guest room. The room offered the hospitality of a double bed, a luxurious bathroom and toilet, a built-in wardrobe and a reading table. The bed was always made, ready for him. The room was also furnished with a television set, a video player and a bedside radio. The brownish carpeting on the floor was soft and warm. Janabi particularly enjoyed the video movies that were never in short supply. Sembe always saw to it that he had the best of them.

“Did you get a chance to see *Wazee* before you came?” Amu asked as they sat down on the sofa.

“Oh, yeah. I went there but I only found your mum. Jakwath was out tending his ‘flock’ and I couldn’t wait,” Janabi said with a grin in his face. “The only message I have is for *Shemeji*. Your mother asked me to remind her of their agreement.”

“Oh, that is the dress *Nyar Alego* was making. I think it should be ready by now.”

“Other than *Nyamungo* whom we buried last weekend, everybody at home is fine.”

Within a few minutes, Odongo came to announce that food was ready.

After dinner, Amu and his guest made their way into the living room. A fire crackled in the brick fireplace as they sank into the comfortable chairs near the hearth. Sparse conversation passed between them. Janabi could see that his host wasn’t himself. Whatever it was, he believed, had some connection with Sembe. Incidentally, Odongo had told him a disturbing story of Sembe going on a journey, but leaving when her husband was away. Unless there was an explanation for this, it could very well be the source of Amu’s gloom. Whatever it was, he left it to Amu to bring it up. However, he felt almost duty bound to ask about Sembe but was careful not to upset his host. Clearing his throat, he said, “Odongo told me that *Semeji* was on some safari?”

"Yes...but it is a long story," Amu said and went silent for about two minutes. Then, he raised his head and gave Janabi a vacant glance. "You see, *Japuonj*, things are not going very well between us."

"What do you mean?"

"You see, Sembe left. She said she wouldn't come back."

"Did you quarrel?"

"No. It was quite surprising to me really," Amu said. Then, he went on to narrate how he came from Eldoret and found the note. Then, he went looking for her but to no avail. "You see, things have been happening between us that it would be unreasonable to assume that our marriage was good or that it can be sustained. I am talking to you as a friend and somebody old enough to appreciate the difficulty I have been in." He paused for a while as though unsure of whether to proceed with the story. Janabi sat tight, digesting every detail, every nuance and every subtlety of his host's words and demeanour.

"At the centre of all this is Sembe's attitude towards me," Amu continued. "I don't know whether you have been in a situation where you seem totally ignored by your wife. I have tried as much as I can. Look at this house. I bought it for my wife and children. What woman wouldn't be happy with such a husband? I buy food, clothing and everything. Recently, only recently, I bought her a car."

Janabi noticed in his voice the depth of his pain and sympathized with him. There was little he could do to alleviate his suffering. At that instant, he decided not to leave Nairobi until he talked to Sembe. Last time he was in Nairobi, and that was only a week ago, Sembe had hinted about her husband's infidelity, but he never imagined that the matter would eventually take such a dramatic turn. He knew that a *Luo* woman would not leave her husband for another woman without a fight. If that were not so, many people, including him, would be separated from their wives. There was something Amu wasn't telling him; something that only Sembe might tell him. Silence befell them—a very uncomfortable silence that lasted until they were drowsy.

"I will go to sleep now," Janabi said as he rose and stretched.

"That is fine. Did Odongo prepare the usual place for you?"

"Yes, he did. Thank you."

"Sleep well."

“And you too,” he replied while disappearing into the hallway leading to the guest room.

Amu remained in the living room, gazing bluntly at the last amber burning itself out in sporadic twinkling blazes. Changes in his life were occurring in almost the same fashion. He was sure the love between him and his wife had burnt out and that she did not really care about him anymore. Now, when he looked back, it seemed as though the whole spectre had been displayed before his eyes long before yet he was unable to see it. Evidently, the relationship between them had deteriorated so much over the last two years that shock treatment such as the one Sembe had just meted out wasn't unexpected. The blatant cold shoulder and her irascible approach to their differences had made their union impossible to live with. Furthermore, Sembe seemed to be more interested in the welfare of her children and the management of the house than him. Often, she made him feel stupid: he drove too fast, he did not discipline the children and the slightest protest on his part would set her off. When she wasn't fighting with him, she was totally focused on the children, so much so that he felt invisible. He felt as though she wasn't attracted to him anymore. She never initiated sex, and whenever they had it, she treated it like a chore.

What kept them going wasn't the passion or romance, but the decorating projects, the doctor's appointments and financial planning. Inasmuch as she wasn't interested in his opinion about most things, she never missed an opportunity to blame him for not participating in family issues. He understood his role to be that of a financier and nothing more. But he sucked up his pain, telling himself that he was probably judging her too harshly. When he thought that his wife wasn't interested in him because he wasn't demonstrative enough, he decided to spend more time with her. He would take her out for dinners but she would quickly wolf the food down and ask that they go home. Whenever they were in the living room together, he would cuddle next to her on the sofa but she would quickly move away. Then, he thought that may be his affection could be amply demonstrated by tangible gifts. He would show up in the evenings with expensive dresses, chocolates, perfume and even shoes. None of these caught his wife's attention.

He wondered, too, if it might have been his fault that the marriage lacked balance. Perhaps it was his timidity and indecisiveness that created room for the free-spirited woman that she was, to lord over him in such unpalatable fashion. Tardy in both thought and deed, he was never ready with an apt word or action to counter Sembe's resolute approach to domestic issues. She always had the upper-hand, a condition that he unobtrusively loathed. Driven off his perch, and Sembe completely dominating the domestic front, he wondered whether there was anything in the world that could be counted upon for solace. Every effort he had made ended in either defeat or failure. The evening dinners, dresses, expensive gold rings and offers for exotic holidays had all been rejected. The wild expression of love and admiration went unnoticed, while provocative advances for sexual intimacy on occasion met with tacit disapproval. Was it simply that he had meagre spirit or little nerve to make their relationship work? But, whatever the reason, it didn't matter anymore. He had found love and warmth in another woman and Sembe was bound to be replaced.

A loud blast in the fireplace woke him from his somnolence. The green flame that followed lit the room. Apparently, Odongo must have turned out the lights except for one dim bulb on a wall bracket in front of him. It was around midnight when he got into his bedroom, which was as empty as a cell from where a condemned prisoner had been extricated to be hanged. He tossed himself into bed and quickly succumbed to the power of the medicines Dr Owino had prescribed.

Janabi was greatly disturbed by what he had heard. Both Amu and his wife were his great friends so a problem affecting them also touched him. Indeed, it appeared that both of them were undergoing a difficult time. Whatever made Sembe leave her home, her children and her husband must be very serious. Although he couldn't lay his hands on the precise nature of the problem, he was confident that the truth was bound to be known tomorrow when he would begin his probe. What was important was that, for once, his friends needed him and he was there for them. He decided to postpone his trip

back home for now just so that he could spend some more time in the city. He planned to talk to Sembe and, if possible, her brother, Okola, the next day.

His scheme was to try to bring the woman back to her family, or negotiate a condition whereby they would at least talk about the problem instead of running away from it. He knew, though, that the task presented innumerable difficulties, least of which would be Amu's stubbornness. In situations where both the husband and wife were people with income, and where both knew that they could survive economically without the other, it might be difficult to convince them to sustain a marriage when the non-financial bond that hitherto had held them together had been severed. In this case, he did not know exactly how that bond was severed and whether it could be repaired. If it were a matter of infidelity on the part of Amu, then chances would be good. However, if it were vice versa, the issue could be complicated. His experience was that when a woman gets into a relationship outside marriage, then she was like food gone bad. The consequences were never good and the marriage was unlikely to survive unless the man acquiesced to the wife's extramarital relationship and became completely subservient to her wishes—a condition that very few *Luo* men could accommodate. According to Amu, his wife left when he wasn't home, meaning that whatever the source of the problem, it was discovered in his absence. Janabi could almost bet that there was a third party involved, either with Amu during his trip, or with Sembe. In his estimation, Sembe was a fairly decent woman who loved her husband dearly. In fact, as far as he was concerned, she was unlike other graduate women who looked down on relatives who were not as educated as they were. She was courteous to people and was always willing to help. He could almost bet that whatever it was, it had to do with Amu. He felt his throat becoming dry. If Sembe were here, he couldn't have gone to bed without a cup of cocoa to warm his belly and soften his body in readiness for sleep. He vowed to talk to her tomorrow. He pulled the blanket to his face and switched off the bedside lamp. Then, he realised that the television set was still on. He hated it when that happened. He switched on the lamp again, picked up the remote control that was on the reading table next to the bed and pressed it. The screen went blank. But,

before he could get into the blanket again, he heard a loud cry from upstairs. Then, he heard footsteps descending the stairs and the cry becoming louder. It was a child crying. He quickly put on his trousers and went out. The kitchen door was open and he saw Amu holding Val on his shoulders while putting small bottles into a small handbag. The child was in delirium, writhing from side to side, obviously in pain.

“She is sick. She has a very high temperature. I have given her medicine but the temperature has not come down. I think I better rush her to the hospital right away,” Amu said upon seeing him.

“I am coming with you,” Janabi said, and he ran back to the room to put on his coat.

“You don’t need to. We shall be fine.”

Chapter Five

WHEN SEMBE OPENED her eyes, the first thing she saw was the thin blue drape barely covering the frame of a single paned window on the wall directly opposite her. Outside, the sun was up and she could hear the hustle and bustle of the morning traffic. Glancing at the watch still strapped to her wrist, and noticing that it was eight thirty, she warmed to the thought that Amu was probably looking everywhere for her. She rose slowly and padded towards the bathroom door. She stumbled over her suitcase and remembered that she had not unpacked any of her things. Her eyes roamed the room to find a little dresser and a built-in wardrobe. She shoved the suitcase into the wardrobe and ran to the bathroom. As the warm water splashed over her body, she felt relieved of the tension that had gripped her all night. She had gone from being angry to feeling sorry for herself, and from hating Amu to missing him. By morning, the anger that had made her flee from home was dislodged by a benign sense of longing. Her plan now, was to patch up things with her husband before the whole world became privy to their marital tantrums.

But she turned cold at the thought of Beth, the husband thief. Surely there must be something that a woman can do about these kinds of people. Perhaps, she could borrow a page from Lucy, Cosmas's wife, who had beaten up her husband's lover at a bus stop in town. But she could never gather enough courage to inflict harm on another human being, no matter how despicable their actions were. Moreover, the main culprit was her husband. There was no way Beth could have sustained the affair if her companion wasn't a willing participant. Perhaps his wasn't love, merely lust fuelled by her inattention to his needs. Her Amu may have found himself trapped between a rapacious prostitute and an inattentive wife, and thus driven into a desperate choice. For once, she convinced herself that she had the power to change all that. She made a decision to go

back to her children and, also, to make the marriage work. Amu, after all, wasn't worse than some men she knew. He had strayed like all human beings do once in a while in their lifetime. Moreover, suffering the embarrassment of a husband's infidelity was a verity of African womanhood, as inevitable as the crow of a rooster at dawn.

Maybe, it was even possible to turn Beth's intrusion into something positive. Beth had made her realise what a blessing Amu had been to her and the children. She remembered the difficult days when they wanted a child and couldn't have one. For three years they tried, but she couldn't conceive. She feared he might lose hope and find another woman. But he stood by her all the way until God blessed them. Amu was supportive and encouraging even when all his relatives were up in arms about the marriage. A man, who sticks by you and sacrifices his credibility and his pride, just so that you remain his wife, is a true partner. In a community where polygamy was rampant, Amu could have found a suitable excuse to marry another woman. But, he never did. What more could she ask for? It was surprising that she never thought of this until Beth came along. It would be sweet irony, would it not, if the slut who probably looked at her and said, "I am going to take her man and wreck her marriage," could now be the catalyst who helps her to rediscover happiness in her marriage.

She was jolted back to the present by a sudden splash of cold water on her shoulders, the shower having run out of hot water. She jumped out and turned back to shut it off. She put down a towel and stepped on, while drying herself with another. When ready, she looked disconsolately at her nude self and fought the impulse to weep tears of love and anticipation. She walked naked to the wardrobe, but her clothes were still tucked in the suitcase. She yanked it open and took out the first garment she laid her hands on. It happened to be a brown suit Amu had bought her on their tenth anniversary. She quickly shimmied into it and then locked the rest of her belongings in the wardrobe. She picked up her purse and hurried to the parking lot.

The time was ten o'clock when she entered her office. She hurriedly looked through the messages hoping to see Amu's. Tim, her brother, had left a message that he would pass by the office in the afternoon. There were messages from her friend, Ayugi, and her boss.

Amu had not called her. Sitting down, she wondered what might have become of him. She resisted the temptation to call his office. Instead, she called her boss to inform him that the project documents she was preparing were ready. He sounded happy on the phone.

"Thank you, Mrs Ndeda," he said. "By the way, I heard some rumours about you. I cannot tell you over the phone, but if you have a minute, stop by my office anytime today."

"I will, sir, as soon as I clear my table," she said.

She lay back on the chair, contemplating how to make her move back to her man, children and home. She thought about the prospects had she decided to leave home forever. For a moment, her soul shuddered at the thought that the marriage could very well have come to an end. But that is what she wrote in the note she left for him on Sunday. How foolish could she have been? Now that she saw things more clearly, her marriage wasn't so bad after all. Like most women, she had suffered the long absence of her husband from home, his lack of interest in marital congeniality and his infidelity. Now, she accepted her situation with a measure of heroism, resolving to direct her energy towards improving the home and taking care of her children. At the same time, she was convinced that there were plenty of positive things in her relationship with Amu, some of which they were yet to explore. But the cure for Amu's self-indulgence had to be found, if not for the purpose of reassuring herself that she was still at the centre of his life, then for saving him from the dire consequences of his fecund appetite.

The work in the office took her mind away from personal troubles. However, she did find time to talk to her boss about the so-called rumour. It turned out to be about the group ranching project for which the ministry had sought the World Bank's collaboration and funding. A few months ago, the World Bank had announced its approval, but the details were still to be worked out. However, the matter had generated a lot of interest among the ministry's top officers. At the centre of much deliberation and even gossip was the manner in which the leaders of the project would be appointed. Sembe was anxious because she, too, wanted to know whether she would be part of the project. When her boss informed her that her name had been forwarded to Washington, D.C. as a possible candidate for deployment to the proposed project, she was elated.

After finishing with the boss, she had a quiet lunch at a restaurant near Uhuru Park and was back in her office well before two o'clock.

Tim was on time or, even, slightly early. He came into the office looking unusually smart. He was donned in a blue Kaunda suit, a maroon tie and shiny brown shoes. Sembe was surprised just as much as she was delighted. At last, her brother was fine-tuning his life, she thought. "Hey, what's the occasion?" she asked as he sat on the table to show off his new shoes.

"That is what I have come to talk to you about. By the way, how are you, the kids and the lover boy?" he asked.

"I don't know how they are. I have not seen them for over twenty-four hours."

"Where have you been?" Tim asked, rather puzzled.

"It is a long story. Tell me yours first."

"Well, look at me, Sis," he said, while stretching his body to show off his attire. "I have a job. I am an insurance sales agent for a big company. The reason I came is because I need support. I want you and Baba Lisa to buy insurance from me—both life and for your cars."

Sembe looked at him and wondered about the transformation her brother had undergone. "Tim, I know very little about insurance matters. Baba Lisa handles all those things. You may need to talk to him."

"That's where you come in, Sis. You will inform him of my request and soften him before I talk to him."

"HMMMMM. But there is still a little problem."

"What's that?"

"Amu and I are not talking to each other. We are separated now. Remember, I told you that I have not seen my children—well, it is because I left home on Sunday and do not intend to go back. So, if you intend to talk to Amu, you will have to look for him yourself."

"Did you guys have a fight?" Tim asked as he sat on the chair facing his sister.

"No, as a matter of fact I left when he was away from home, having a good time with his girlfriend."

"You didn't fight and he didn't kick you out of the house, eh? What are you telling me, Sis? That is a big decision right there. Are you sure that leaving your house was the best thing to do?"

“Tim, are you a prosecutor or a judge of what is right and not right for me?”

“No, Sis, I am just trying to understand. Remember, I am your brother and I love you more than anything. I will die for you but please just let me understand the situation here. I know you had problems with Amu messing around with that skinny woman from Kano, but you letting her destroy you, your house, children and all that...I don't know, Sis. Have you told Okola yet?”

“No. In fact, I have told nobody yet, except you. I also don't know how to go about this.”

“There is only one way, Sis. Let's tell Okola and Jeremiah about the problem. Then, they can talk to Amu and have the matter straightened out.”

“No, I am not going back, now. At least I want answers to certain questions first.”

“But how are you going to get the answers unless you ask the man concerned?” Tim implored.

“I don't know, Tim. I don't know.”

“So, are you in Kambilamoshi?”

“No, I am staying at the CYH.”

Despite going to bed late the previous night, Janabi woke up at six in the morning. He washed his face and hurriedly put on his clothes. As he left his room, he heard Amu talking. He was giving instructions to Odongo about Val's medication when Janabi caught up with him in the kitchen. Amu was dressed and ready to leave.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“Oh, yes,” Janabi replied, then hastily asked, “How is she?”

“I think she will be fine. I have to go to the office, even for a short while.”

“I would also like to go to town. Can you give me a lift,” Janabi asked.

“By all means. But you have not eaten breakfast.”

“I will be okay.”

“Then, let's roll.”

As Amu drove out of the gates and onto the main road, his thoughts were distant. Although he chuckled excitedly about the rising sun and the prospect of rain in the days to come, his mind appeared to be wrapped up in malady and muted hostility. There was no denying that the absence of his wife from home was taking its toll on him. One could tell it was a condition to which he wasn't accustomed. He attempted to mask his feeling of deprivation with facetious comments and short loud laughs. But when he noticed that his passenger wasn't participating in his chatter, he clammed up and quietly resigned himself to his thoughts. Suddenly, a feeling of disquiet descended upon them—Janabi believing that his host had refused to divulge information that could illuminate the circumstances of his estrangement and Amu fearing that his visitor may be planning to intrude too much on his private life.

They came into the city by way of Uhuru Highway. Janabi asked to be dropped off near Fimbo House. He did not inform Amu of his plans but indicated that he would find his way back to Kileleshwa later. When the car stopped at the traffic lights, he swung brusquely from his seat and hopped onto the tarmac. He ran across the road and joined the mass of humanity trekking through Uhuru Park to reach the government offices on the hill.

Janabi was relieved that Sembe was willing to discuss her problems with him. Without wasting any time, she narrated, in detail, what had happened; how she had seen Amu kissing the tall woman. Janabi thought of asking her to come back home straight away but feared that a hasty approach could be shunned. In such dire emotional conditions, confidence and trust offer the best promise of success. He decided to be patient and let things fall into place, one at a time. Janabi kept reassuring her that her husband loved her very much and was, indeed, in misery after she left. By the manner of his speech, he was utterly dismayed at Amu's inappropriate candour, but carefully avoided any discussions that could illuminate his own proclivities on that front. They went for lunch at the Kiosks opposite Wigan Hotel and, when they came back, he told her about Val's sickness.

"I miss my children very much. How is she now?" she asked, tears in her eyes.

"Oh, she is fine. The doctor said it was just flu."

Finally, Janabi couldn't hold it in any longer. "*Semeji*, why don't we go home so that you can see your baby?" he asked.

She thought for a while. Janabi noticed that, in her heart, she was ready to go home but wanted something to compel her. "But, you see, I do not want Amu to find me there," she said.

"Well, we can go now and you will be able to leave before he comes home."

"He will think that I still want him despite what he has done to me. *Semeji*, do you know that woman – I mean Beth, the one he loves more than us?"

"Don't say that. Ever since I have known you and Amu, I have never known him to love any woman more than you. The man is hurting very badly now. And no, I don't know her. She could be one of those cheap sluts in town for all I know. You even know her name?"

"Yeah, you see Kizito told me about her a long time ago and when I asked Amu, he denied it. That was three weeks ago. I should have left him then."

Janabi was surprised that Kizito also knew about this. "Now, he knows you are serious and from what has transpired, I don't think he will attempt this kind of nonsense again," he assured her.

When she finally agreed to go home with him, he was ecstatic. He knew that once inside the house with her children, she would find it difficult to leave. She needed to complete a report before they left so she asked him to wait a while. He sneaked out of the office and made a telephone call to Amu. He told him why his wife had left home. Amu was rather surprised but did not deny the accusation. Janabi could tell that he appreciated the gravity of his situation and needed help. This is when Janabi suggested to him that it would be appropriate for him to seek his wife, expiate his sins and beg her to come back home. He did not tell him that Sembe and he were heading home. When he came back, she was ready to leave.

"I love him so much that I will go if that's what he wants. But I hope he will give me a chance to be the wife he has always wanted," she told Janabi as they strolled to the car.

"I know he loves you too. What he did was despicable. No wonder he was so ashamed to tell me. I will talk to him rather sternly about that," he said, feeling happy that the mission had been accomplished.

Amu was devastated by the information. He had never imagined that Sembe could have gone to such lengths to uncover the truth about his affair. He remembered how he had denied it so vehemently when she asked him a few weeks ago and he felt deeply ashamed. He called Cosmas and, together, they agreed that it was best to look for Sembe before the matter got out of hand.

Thrown off balance by the impending implosion, he began to question whether he was entitled to his actions. Was it right for a man to have an extramarital affair even if he wasn't happy with his wife? Would it not be fair to end a bad relationship first before starting another? He snapped his fingers and examined the ceiling in vain hope that it might provide answers. The thought that he was the offender in this case disturbed his conscience. For the first time, he felt beaten at his own game. The burden of guilt drained him of all sensuality, leaving him prey to his emotions. The fond memories of the immediate past and the unpredictability of the future cast over him, an agonising spell of self-realisation. It was time to take stock of his situation with unbridled objectivity; time to trace the course of his love for his wife and family and see where mistakes were made.

Indeed, Beth was at the centre of his predicament. The feeling of deprivation and want that had propelled his love for Beth was being tested. Bereft of the nostalgic flavour that had hitherto graced all occasions when they met, he began to feel as though he had gone to bed with a porcupine. True, he had savoured his moments with her but such occasions, stimulating though they were, tended to be expensive both emotionally and financially. He was like an inebriated creature, allowing himself to be steered in whatever direction she pleased. Within a span of nine months, he had moved Beth out of the crummy East Leigh neighbourhood to a fully-furnished apartment in Lango Road area, bought land in Kisumu, jointly in their names, taken her on three trips to Europe and South Africa, bought her gifts of value from all over the globe and generally supported her day-to-day living. He had even promised to buy her a car similar to the one Sembe was driving. But what did he get in return? Nothing except sex and company whenever he was spurned at home.

Now that he thought about it, a woman needed to bring more to the table than just an adorable face and a rounded bosom. If the only thing going for Beth was beauty, then she could hardly keep him in her thrall because a man of his intellect needed more in life than mere aesthetics. What pained him more was that the goodies Beth had enjoyed exceeded that which he had offered to his wife and children. He had not taken his family even to Mombasa for a single holiday. He never spent enough evenings and weekends with his children. “The tragedy of manhood,” a friend once told him, “is that we struggle to make money and when we are finally there, we neglect those who supported us but spend our wealth on those who would never support us.”

There was no getting away from the fact that he had not handled his affairs well. He needed to fix things, and fast. Confronting Sembe would be difficult, let alone demonstrating his conversion. His mother had once cautioned him that “hell hath no fury like a woman scorned”. He needed a plan, but wondered where to begin. Offering an apology and begging for forgiveness wasn’t such a preposterous proposition after all, that is, if he could find her first and then make her listen.

He was still swathed in his own thoughts when Cosmas walked in. He had information that Sembe was staying at the CYH on Kala Road—a useful piece of information indeed. “A friend told me that he saw her car in the parking lot. I then put two and two together and bingo! So, what do you think? Do you want to see your queen?” Cosmas chuckled rather excitedly.

“That is perfect. I wonder why she went to the hostel? Could she not go to her brother’s place? I guess she was just confused.”

“I think so, too. So, what are you going to tell her?”

“What I know is that I will have to do some very serious begging if I want her back.”

“That’s true. Remember when my wife beat up Natasha? I had a really difficult time, you know? What scared me even more was the probability that the matter could end up in court. I didn’t know how I could ever convince Natasha not to report the matter to the police if she wanted to. Her injuries were pretty serious, you know. Her neck was swollen and her back had lacerations all the way to her waist. But, she was cool. She let the matter slide. I had to give

her some money, though, not as a payoff but just to smooth things over. Then came that rich Nigerian and off she went, never to look back. I have learned one lesson, though, that whenever a situation of conflict such as this arises, strive to save your marriage at all costs and anything or anybody should come a distant second. So, let us find Sembe. When we do, we shall find something to tell her.”

They drove to a nearby pub and, after one or two beers, went to CYH. When they got there, the lady receptionist told them that the person they were looking for had just checked out. The only other likely place where she could have gone was Kambilamoshi. Amu asked whether he could use the phone and the receptionist graciously agreed. Sensing that it might take a long time before he got home, he decided to call the house and find out how his sick child was doing. That is when he knew—she was home.

Chapter Six

SEMBE'S HOMECOMING was a kind of new beginning for both husband and wife. The spouses may have been separated for two nights only, but the experience had rejuvenated their love and created closeness, akin to that of newlyweds. It was as though they had stumbled on the key to a happy marriage. Engrossed in his family affairs, Amu did not notice that days and, sometimes, weeks passed without him calling Beth. Cosmas had advised him against severing his relationship with her at once because it would not be fair, and a girl like Beth might even commit suicide. Amu had taken to calling her midweek, usually Tuesdays, when it would be easier to find an excuse not to be with her. But he continued to pay her rent and other household bills. For some reason, he felt he had an obligation to settle her financial needs and occasionally visit when she had a problem. Like when her brother died, he sent her some money and even stopped by her apartment to express his condolences. That evening, he resisted the temptation to make love to her but admitted to Cosmas a few days later, that the thought had crossed his mind.

Deep inside, Amu wished that the Beth issue would simply go away. But it never did. In October, barely three months after he had been converted like Saul of Tarsus, Beth left a message with Sally that she wanted to see him urgently. When he called her, she was unwilling to discuss the matter over the phone. They agreed to meet at Hot Bite Restaurant on Fimbo Avenue. Amu thought it was something to do with his scarcity but was glad nevertheless that it might provide an opportunity to discuss the future of their relationship in a serious way. He wasn't sure of how to introduce this point when he joined her at the restaurant later that evening. Concerned that somebody might see them together, they moved to the upper floor and took a table at the far corner of the room. She started talking even before she sat down, shedding a few tears and

blaming the hash in her life on Amu's indecisiveness. In these circumstances, he couldn't bring himself to unload truthfully all that was on his mind. He held her hands and promised that everything would be fine. When she regained her composure, she looked him straight in the eye and said, "Amu, there is something I want to tell you and I want your opinion about it."

"What is it, my dear?" he asked.

"You see, since we were together that weekend, I have been feeling sick," she said while wiping tears from her left cheek.

"What do you mean, sick? Did you see the doctor?"

"Amu, I think I'm pregnant."

He did not anticipate such a bombshell. He sat motionless for a moment, looked at her and then at the wall. "How could it be? I thought you used protection."

"We didn't have protection and you know it."

"I didn't know, Beth." He stood up abruptly, his knees knocking on the table and causing the utensils to rattle noisily. "I have three children and a wife who loves me. What is this you want to pull on me? You want to ruin my life or what?" He was almost shouting.

Beth was infuriated beyond measure by his instant reaction. Though she had anticipated that he would not exactly be pleased with her status, at least she thought he would try and show some feelings. After all, it wasn't her fault alone that a life was being brought into the world. But his extreme reaction made her very angry. Her head exploded with rage. Suddenly, she pulled away the tablecloth and everything that was on it tumbled down. She rose without saying a word, picked up her purse and ran down the steps. Amu, fearing that she might do something stupid, ran after her, calling her name. But she would not listen. He caught up with her on the ground floor and tried to hold her hands. She stopped to look at him. "What do you want now? How can you say I want to ruin your life? How about me? How about my life?" She shrugged her shoulders scornfully, her sodden face gripped with anguish.

"I am sorry. I didn't mean that exactly," he apologised.

"What did you mean, exactly?"

He threw his arms around her shoulders and led her to the Volvo that was parked across the street. He then came back to the restaurant and settled the bill, including that for the broken glasses.

She was still crying when he came to the car. Deciding that it was prudent to spend some time with her, he drove the car slowly towards Mamluki Avenue and then onto Lango Road. They arrived at the apartment after about an hour, but without anyone saying a word. She went straight to bed, ignoring his presence. Amu sat for a while watching television then he went to the kitchen and made an omelette. He put it on a small plate and took it to her in the bedroom. He begged her to forgive him for being insensitive. "My reaction was out of line," he said slowly, searching for words that would explain his action without upsetting her. "I was shocked, that's all. I didn't know what to say or do. Now, I understand how important it is to you. I am sorry." He tried to kiss her as he used to do several months ago, but she drew away.

Beth just lay there, her body still shaking with emotion.

"I am sorry, Beth. Please forgive me?" he begged.

When he passed over the plate, she held it and took a bite of the omelette. After a while, she spoke. "Now that I think about it, I don't want anything from you. As you said, it will be my child and I don't want you to be involved. You can go back to your loving wife and children and leave me alone."

"Beth, please," he begged, dropping on the bed next to her.

"Look here, I am so tired. I would like to sleep for a while," she said, fighting to keep back the tears.

She dismissed him as though he did not matter at all. While he knew that she did not mean it, the reaction revealed part of her character that he had not seen before. Something in the tone of her voice and the expression on her face sent a wave of stony fear over him. He drew from the bed and walked to the sitting room. Lacking something to do, he wandered around the room, rearranging books, magazines and whatever else that seemed out of place. Later, he switched off the television set and banged the outer door to make it sound as though he had left. Then, he tiptoed back to the sofa and sat quietly.

A sickening bout of fear kneaded his mind. For a man who had removed himself or thought he had removed himself from the bondage of an extra-marital affair, rediscovered love for his wife and worked so hard to inspire her confidence, the current predicament crushed him like a banana peel beneath the wheels of

an automobile. He hated the weakness in him that allowed the appeal of Beth's vulnerability overshadow his sense of judgment. In the days of their friendship, he had generously provided for all her needs and offered her protection. In return, she trusted and loved him. It was natural for her to expect sensitivity and understanding from him, given her condition. But how could he be when their relationship wasn't based on commitment? She knew he had a wife and three daughters; it was impossible for him to commit to her. He may have loved her, true, but that alone wasn't enough for her to expect him to father her child. Well, the child was already conceived and there was little he could do. Perhaps, Beth was well aware of this fact and she could have planned it, which is why she was making demands on him at this particular time. When he acted like an idiot back at the restaurant, her heart must have been torn apart. What was he supposed to say to her? What was he going to do now? He buried his face in his hands and closed his eyes.

In his estimation, he could do one of two things. He could placate her some more and hope to win remorse and forgiveness, or he could abandon everything and go home to his wife and children. The latter option seemed unpalatable, given that he was somehow responsible for her condition. Moreover, if Beth chose to, she could make a lot of trouble for him and with nothing to lose. But even if she did not, taking responsibility for Beth and her child couldn't, unlike in the past, remain hidden from his wife forever. The consequences of this were all too glaring: the unfathomable emotional anguish that his dear wife would have to endure and the possible break-up of his marriage. He couldn't think of having ever been in a worse situation.

After about ten minutes, Beth emerged from the bedroom wearing nothing but a short, frothy silk dress that barely covered her frame. She was surprised to see him. She stared at him for a moment and then walked to the kitchen. He had no inkling as to what was going on in her mind. She took a glass from the sink and poured some cold water into it. She carried it back to the bedroom. When Amu followed her there, he found her sitting on the bed. He sat next to her and put his hands on her shoulders, drawing her closer to him.

"I just wanted to say I am sorry," he said.

She did not say anything even though he kept on talking. He reassured her and offered to support her in every way. This seemed to have an effect on her. "Thank you," she said and went back to silent mode. He kissed her and left.

It was past ten o'clock when he reached his house in Kileleshwa. Sembe was still awake and was sitting on the sofa, reading a women's magazine. He knew there must be a problem. Since they found love again, he had made it a point to call his wife in advance whenever he wasn't going to be home early. But the events of this evening were so intense that he barely had time to think of such a triviality. He felt tired and completely drained. Also, he wasn't in a mood for his wife's probing or chatter just as much as he wasn't prepared to share with her the nature of his predicament. He resolved to head straight to his bedroom. She ensured that he did not. "Amu, there is some food for you. Would you like to have it now or would you rather take a bath first?" she asked. He chose the latter.

He watched Sembe put the food into the microwave. She was all that one could ask for in a woman: beautiful, affectionate and full of vitality. Her skin was natural, with no make-up and the blue-black tracksuit looked good on her. He noticed that she had gained a little weight but just enough to smooth her skin and magnify the dimples on her face. The curve of her back and her slightly tousled hair evidenced her resignation, her patience and the unquestionable belief in the chastity of their marriage. He knew he loved her even though his past actions barely supported such emotions. Now, he was in a deeper quandary; the abounding guilt making it ludicrously pretentious to articulate such feelings. How he wished things were different.

While absorbed in mute deliberation, his daughter, Lisa, came in and sat next to him. She threw an exercise book and pencil on the table and asked him to help with her homework. Before he could say anything, Sembe walked to the table and said, "I thought I told you to go to bed. Go ask Odongo in the kitchen. Leave your father alone."

The youngster made a tacit appeal with her eyes, but was flagrantly ignored by her father.

"Mama, go and ask Odongo. He will help you with it," he said.

Lisa, pouting, left the living room and staggered her way into the kitchen. In the meantime, Sembe set the food on the table. "I am surprised that she is still awake. I know she wants something from daddy," Sembe said. "Do you want some *Mala* with your food? I brought some from the office today."

Amu looked at the food in front of him and wondered how he could ever have found his wife's grooming and pampering inadequate. He passed his hands through his hair. "No, don't bother. I will be fine," he said.

"It is no bother. I could warm some fresh milk if that's what you prefer."

"I say it's all right." His voice grated.

Sembe looked at him not knowing where to begin. "Were you at the office this late? You are pretty agitated," she prickled with indignation.

"I went somewhere after work."

"By yourself?"

"With a friend."

"Somebody from the office?"

"No."

"Who is it then?"

Amu slammed his fist on the table. The plate rattled. He stood up and looked straight to her. "What is it with you, questioning me like this? Since when did you start taking account of all my evening errands?" he shouted. "Do you think I am a child or what?"

"I just asked you a simple question, Amu. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to." She spoke gently yet firmly, very much unlike her usual rage.

"Since you want to know, I will tell you. I was with a woman. She wasn't my sister or relative. Do you hear that?"

"Yes, I heard you Amu, loud and clear," she said rising. "Ahaaaaa, as if you think I have not heard about it?"

"About what? Her?"

"What her? Ahhaaa!" she laughed some more. "I mean Brian, your friend. He died and that's where you were, now you want to pull my leg," she said, walking away from him. She was on the staircase, still laughing. "And, Amu, please, he was my friend too. I share your loss. So, when you come upstairs, be a little pleasant to me. All right, Baba Lisa?"

Brian Omondi was a friend of his. They had known each other from the days when they lived in Ndola Estate. He was living with his cousin while Brian was with his elder brother, two blocks away. Then, he had just graduated from Kenya Polytechnic and was working as a waiter in a small Indian restaurant in Industrial Area. Brian was an insurance sales agent for British African Insurance. During weekends, they would walk to City Stadium to watch football and then grab a free ride on the crowded Kenya buses on their way back. Sometimes, they would sneak to Chakula Kinywaji Bar in Ndola and have a beer. Those days, they lamented their lot for the improper treatment they were getting from their hosts and gossiped a great deal about the poor choice of women their relatives had married. They shared the most intimate of their secrets and made collective attempts, although with little success, to woo maids in the estate. It was Brian who introduced Amu to city life and gave him some knowledge about the temperament of the opposite sex. Brian would tell him not to take “no” for an answer from a woman. “They often say ‘no’ when they mean ‘yes’ and never say ‘yes’ at all,” he would counsel. But, Brian was not much of a lady’s man himself. He had no known girlfriend although he boasted of his conquests in remote circumstances that could not be verified. Now that Amu thought about it, Brian was just as shy as he was. No wonder they were such good friends.

Before he left Ndola, Brian had secured a job with some business enterprise run by a highly-placed government official. His duty was to arrange shipment and delivery of a variety of imports, including sugar and cereals. He frequently travelled to Mombasa and, occasionally, Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. Brian acquired the flamboyance of an international businessman and his income grew exponentially. When Brian bought his first car, an old Audi, his life changed. Suddenly, he began to excel in the ladies department. Once or twice, Amu heard him justify sex before marriage in such glorious terms as though it were a natural process of human development. “I do believe that during his youth, a man should fully enjoy, sowing all those wild oats so that when he gets older and decides to settle down to matrimony, he has no regrets,” he would say.

His acquaintance with Lorna still rang bells in Amu's mind, especially because of how they were once treated by Lorna's parents when they visited, or attempted to visit. That afternoon, they had driven the Audi into the compound of a vast Rose Gardens property, the home of Lorna's parents. Lorna's father must have thought they were robbers. He shouted to his worker to bring the gun and release the dogs. Brian and Amu ran back to the car, but the engine would not start. Without hesitation, they leaped out and ran towards the gate with the dogs barking furiously behind them. They disappeared into the thicket behind the property and hid until they were sure everything was quiet. Then, they walked all the way to the main road and boarded a bus. When they were in town, Brian called Lorna only to be told that she was out and was not expected until later. The following afternoon, Amu saw the Audi parked in the street and Lorna was sitting in the passenger seat. It was still a mystery to Amu how Brian was able to retrieve it after that spectacular experience.

Brian bought a house in High End soon after that incident. He offered Amu the chance to stay with him, but Amu declined. He had always thought of his friend as being a little extravagant thus he could never afford living with him. But, he never missed the chance to visit, especially if he was picked up and dropped off in the new red Corolla 90 that Brian had subsequently acquired. His friend was generous and most humble. He would never do anything to hurt another person. Some of Brian's friends took advantage of this. They would feast lavishly on his generosity and gossip unashamedly about his employer.

Two years later, when Amu moved to High End, they became neighbours again and their friendship blossomed. By the time Sembe came into the picture, Brian had a girlfriend at the university, studying law. He boasted openly that he would never marry a woman who had no professional training. "Men of consequence associate with women of substance," he would say. His girlfriend, Wanda Nyambok, graduated two years ahead of Sembe. She joined Kenya School of Law and, immediately after graduation, secured a plush job with African Industrial Bank. By the time Sembe was leaving college, Wanda Nyambok had a house in Upper Hill. In a very short time, Brian and Wanda were married. Against advice from friends and

relatives, Brian moved into the woman's house in Upper Hill and sold his High End house. Unfortunately, their union did not last long. In one short year, they disagreed and Brian was kicked out of the house. He went back to High End and rented a house. But Brian, like a cat, had nine lives. He struggled again and, before long, he had purchased the house in which he was living. Later, he befriended Miriam, a beautiful girl who was a clerk with the Nairobi City Council. Brian and Miriam soon had a child. He had met Miriam many times and had approved of her conduct. He had even offered to be their best man should they decide to wed. As for the current status of their union, Amu was not very sure.

The fact that his friend had died, shocked him. But Beth's pregnancy weighed even more heavily on his heart as he climbed the stairs to join his wife in the bedroom. He wondered whether he would ever come out of the problem unscathed like the last time. When he got there, Sembe was already asleep. He put on his pyjamas and slipped between the sheets. Sleep was rare at these dire moments. He pictured in his mind the various scenarios that could attend to his problem. If he told Sembe outright that Beth was pregnant with his baby, perhaps she could be sympathetic towards him, once again. But this was a risk he wasn't prepared to take. Their relationship was still tenuous, it needed to be strengthened and not tried. If he did learn anything from his past indiscretion, it was that destruction was often much easier than reconstruction. The terrifying moments that he had lived after Sembe discovered his lie had taught him prudence—never to take his wife for granted. After that experience, he wanted to enjoy whatever fate put on his platter and, indeed, he had started to do so when Beth impudently interrupted. As his tired body succumbed to sleep, he wondered what this fate had in store for him now.

Chapter Seven

BETH DELIVERED HER baby in early April, about six months after Brian's death. Amu paid the hospital bills and bought all the necessary items for the baby. On the day when mother and child were discharged from the hospital, Amu sent Kioko with the company car to take them home. Beth had been a little disappointed that he couldn't make it but was nonetheless grateful that he had provided financially for his child. That day after work, Amu wanted to stop by her place but dropped the idea when he remembered that Beth's aunt, who had brought a maid for her, was there. He also anticipated that many people from her place of work would be visiting. Inasmuch as he wanted to show support, he figured that it was probably for her good that he stayed away. Moreover, his absence on that one occasion couldn't jeopardise the relationship that he might want to forge with his child.

Despite his earlier resolve that Beth would not distract him from his commitment to his family, the fact that her baby was a boy made a huge impact on the way he viewed their relationship. He loved his daughters very much and the thought of having a boy only occasionally came to mind. Although several of his aunts always asked him why they couldn't have more children, hinting that the process of childbearing was incomplete until a boy was born into the family, he had resigned himself to the belief that, in the present day and age, the difference between sexes did not really matter. But, with the arrival of Beth's child, his perspective on gender changed somewhat. Now, his mind was preoccupied with plans on how to integrate the baby into his household.

Amu named his son Moses Ndeda. Confidently and with little concern for Sembe, he started spending a lot of time with Beth and Moses. It became a familiar story, even in the office, that Amu had another wife and child. Thus, it did not take long before Sembe and her nosy friend, Ayugi, once again discovered what was going on.

Amu had suspected as much because he noticed a big change in Sembe and was on guard, waiting to be attacked. His resolve was to make Sembe know he intended to keep his son, but wasn't yet ready to confront her. He counted on her to initiate the discussion. Although he had not decided whether to marry Beth as a second wife, he made a provision that should Sembe leave him as she did the first time, he would swiftly move Beth and Moses into his house. With this attitude, he became careless in the manner in which he conducted the relationship. He would spend evenings at Beth's place and come home late at night. On weekends, he would disappear most of the time and only show up in the evenings. And when he did, he would be in a foul mood, never interested in discussing his outings with anybody.

One weekend in August, the matter went too far. He unexpectedly spent the night at Beth's apartment. When he got home the next day, Sembe was standing in the driveway with her arms wrapped about her shoulders and her face bent under her long braided hair. She was talking to a visitor in a pick-up who was ready to leave. The visitor was one whom he particularly disliked—Rajabu, a widowed mother of three, whose late husband, Remi Ochilloh, was a friend. In fact, it was he who had helped Remi to set up a second-hand car selling business. At the time of his death two years ago, he had built a beautiful mansion in Runda Estate and set up a fancy hair salon for Rajabu in the centre of the city. Unfortunately, Amu thought, it was the salon that still carried Remi's legacy. Besides being very successful, it had a reputation as a gossip centre; a place where the patrons filled one another's ear with the latest occurrences in the social life of the city.

They must have been talking about him because both of them raised their heads and stared at him as though he were a stranger. When he got out of the Volvo, Rajabu revved the pick-up as though to take off, but the vehicle did not move. As he raised his hand to greet her, she chuckled in her usual deceitful manner. "How are you, Baba Lisa?" she asked

"I am doing fine, *Shemeji*," Amu responded, hiding his unease behind a vivacious smile. "How are the children?"

"They are fine."

"And the business?"

“Slow, very slow. Even, my usual customers like your wife here, these days they don’t come. That’s why I came by to find out why she has abandoned me.”

“Why don’t you come in then?” he said.

“No, I was just leaving,” she said. And, turning to Sembe with a smile, “Sem, I am going home. See you tomorrow at lunch.” With that, she drove off, the trail of her pick-up hazed by white exhaust fumes.

Abruptly, Sembe turned to go into the house, holding her daughter’s hands. Amu knew that she wasn’t in a good mood because she kept humming a gospel song. Maybe, it was the hot news that Rajabu brought or just the fact that he had skipped the matrimonial bed for a night. He anticipated tacit accusations from her and with good reasons. Certainly, he had overstepped the limits of her tolerance and could expect no less. He felt overwhelmed by guilt as he followed her into the house. Sprawled on the sofa, he listened to Sembe fretting about everything in the house, and watched his daughter playing on the steps to the dining room.

“Val,” he called softly, making his first overture since his return.

Val made no response, merely wiped her nose with the back of her hand and continued to play.

“Mama, come talk to Daddy,” he repeated.

Val looked at him.

“Come and talk to me,” he insisted. Val made a slow approach towards her father, wondering what he was up to.

“Where is Anna?” he asked as he lifted the child to his lap.

“She is doing homework in her room,” the child said.

“And you, you don’t have any homework?” the father inquired.

“I don’t have my books. Odongo has not given me the books,” she murmured, while scratching below her belly.

Sembe, who had been listening to the conversation from the kitchen, suddenly emerged. “Did you give your books to Odongo when you came from school on Friday?” she retorted. “Go and ask Salama in the kitchen to look for them,” she said, as she settled on a chair near the door as if to monitor the encounter between a man and his daughter. Val disappeared into the kitchen and, in a short while, came back with a twisted face. She had not found her books. Just then, Lisa came in carrying a dirty Manila bag with protruding from it.

“Val left her books at the shamba, in the rain,” she said with a smile.

“No, I didn’t do that,” Val protested.

“But Salama picked up these books from the shamba,” Lisa insisted.

Amu was too tired even to begin solving the problem between his two daughters. He asked Val to go and do her homework and to take care of her books in the future. After the children left, Amu and his wife sat quietly, each waiting for the other to say something. The atmosphere filled with rancour and tension made him wish that their daughter could stay for a little longer.

Sembe twisted her mouth as she usually did when annoyed about something. It wasn’t long before she began to assail him. “You are a stranger to your children. Now, you can see it. You don’t spend time with them. You are always out, even during weekends when you should be available for them,” she said and then kept quiet, hoping that he would say something but he remained silent.

“I am also tired. Last time, when we talked about this, you promised that you would not see that harlot of yours again. You were just lying and lying and lying. Nothing you promise is true. Now, how do you expect me to be waiting for you here when you are busy making women pregnant all over town?”

Her directness was surprising as much as it was unsettling. The subject begged rumination but Sembe wasn’t giving him enough time to think. Perhaps it was time for him to be direct but he wasn’t sure Sembe could handle the truth.

“Actually, Sembe, I have wanted to talk to you,” he said, sitting straight on the sofa. “You see, it has been kind of difficult for me but, after some thought, I have decided that I should tell you. First of all, I want you to know that I love you very much—you and the children and nothing will ever change that,” he confessed. “But...”

“Haaaaaaa,” she mused. “That is just another of your lies. If it were so, then...”

“Just let me finish, please,” he begged. “It is true! I love my children and their mother more than everything in this world. This is why I have trouble talking about some of the things that have crept into my life lately. I know I haven’t been forthright with you in the past and I regret it deeply,” he said, looking down at the floor. “I don’t have a lover besides you. I tried to last time and I was

busted. I don't do so any more. However, during the dark days of my association with that woman, she tricked me into getting her pregnant. The child was born four months ago. She was able to prove that the child is mine. Now, she is trying to blackmail me into a relationship I don't want. It is my desire to bring the child home to put a stop to her antics."

"Over my dead body!" Sembe exclaimed. "I don't want a bastard in my home. Go join them and leave us alone. I always knew you were looking for a son and that is why you are sleeping around. Do you think it's my fault that you don't have a son? We could always try again. If you would have gone to school beyond Kenya Polytechnic, you could have known that the sex of a child is determined by the man and not the woman."

"I never said it was anybody's fault, Sembe, and stop insulting me. I went to school long enough to be able to feed my family. Have you missed anything because I don't have a college degree? Furthermore, how many college graduates are hanging out here without jobs? Degree, woman, my foot! Don't ever tell me that again."

"It's the difficulty of your keeping your word that makes me wonder whether it has something to do with school," she stuck to the point, obviously determined to annoy him.

"Sembe, did you want us to talk or do you just want to insult me?"

"I thought we were talking, or even that you can't understand?" she said, sarcastically.

Amu stood and, for a moment, he looked at her then walked away to the bedroom. He was very annoyed. He knew that if he kept talking to her, he might end up hitting her. This was something he did not want to do. He had seen his parents quarrel and, not even once, did he see his father hit his mother. But his cousin, Nyabari, was a home tyrant. He assaulted his wife many times and Amu was amazed that the two never divorced. Once they fought inside the house and broke everything. Nyabari had impregnated the maid and had given her money to go home, but she never did. She stayed with her aunt in Ndondosha and, when she was delivered of the baby, she brought it to Ndola. Nyabari settled the matter by promising the girl and her aunt financial support, and on the home front he fought his way to harmony.

His fear of violence wasn't motivated by the philosophical predisposition only. He was equally frightened that he may not be able to subdue her physically. Over the years, Sembe had grown to be a big woman. If by any chance she got you to the ground, he thought, you would never get up against her will. Mburu Gichau, a neighbour of his in High End Estate, once had the misfortune of falling down when fighting his wife. She sat on him while calling the neighbours to come and help her. The three hundred and fifty pounds of flesh held Mburu to the ground and nearly suffocated him. The neighbours who came were surprised to find that it was Mburu who needed help.

Amu sat on the bed and covered his face with his hands. He was in the same kind of trouble that his cousin had suffered many years ago. But, in his case, neither money nor violence seemed appropriate. Perhaps, what the situation required was forthrightness but pursuing such a cause seemed impossible. Although his problems appeared malleable to a peaceful resolution, Sembe's belligerent attitude seemed to portend a far greater danger of physical confrontation, something that he wanted to avoid at all costs. She knew that he did not take kindly to being reminded that he was less educated than she was. But, she persisted on this path, twisting her every move towards that end and leaving him no room for escape. It seemed as though she was dead serious about making him upset.

The quiet deliberation must have driven him into somnolence. Raising his head, he found Sembe standing next to the bed, holding Val on her shoulders.

"Will you come for dinner or your whore made something for you?" she shouted.

"Sembe, please, I don't want to fight now," he begged. "I am tired and a bit ill."

"You can be sick for all I care," she added, with a rueful laugh. "If you want to eat, food is downstairs and we shall not wait for you," she said while disappearing down the stairs.

He was offended but decided to join his family for supper. He knew better than to ignore a family ritual. Moreover, he did not want to invite further derision and rebuke from his wife.

At the dinner table, he was grim and more reticent. Sembe treated him with less formality than usual, choosing to ignore her customary habit of serving him first before filling her children's dishes. He

served himself, partly as a claim to his independence, but mainly to narrow down the points of conflict. He retreated into himself even as he began munching his food. He ate slowly and nervously, staring moodily at the darkness and ignoring his wife whose belligerent mood was written all over her face. When he finished, he retired to the living room, hoping that the cease-fire would hold.

But the woman would not relent. "The children were asking for you last night," she said while sitting at her spot near the door.

Sensing a quarrel, he left to take refuge in the bedroom. She followed him.

"Why don't you want to talk to me? I am trash, garbage. After all, I cannot get a baby boy. Is that what you think of me, Amu?"

"Why do you put words in my mouth, Sembe? Why are you so intent on making my evening so uncomfortable? Don't you have something else to keep you busy?"

"You mean like screwing around?"

"Sem, please, let's not fight. I am sorry I spent the night out but I wasn't at Beth's place. We were at a funeral in Jericho," he lied. "If you don't believe me, call Cosmas and ask him."

"I don't care about your stupid excuse. You want me to wait until I catch you red-handed like I did last time?"

Being called stupid was more than he could bear. She had done that more than twice in one afternoon and he was prepared to let go, but not anymore. "I am trying to be civil so that we can discuss this issue like grown-ups but you don't seem to be cooperating. Now, let me tell you something, Sembe. If you call me stupid again, you will regret it," he warned while stretching onto the bed.

"What will you do? Heee, what will you do to me that you have not done already?"

"Beat some sense into you. That is what I will do and I haven't done that already or have I?"

"Get up!" she screamed. "Get up! Come and beat me. Kill me so that you can have your harlot. Come on, beat me now!"

"Look, Sembe. Don't talk such nonsense. You will wake the children."

"Don't talk to me!" her voice rose hysterically. "Don't talk to me about sense. What do you know about sense if even school was ..."

"You... I am telling you..."

He stood up, completely overwhelmed by her display of temerity. He pointed his finger at her while shaking with rage, but words refused to come out. He had never been annoyed like this before.

Sembe was shaking with rage too. "Tell me what?" she hissed. "You dirt! How can you wallow in such filth, such muck? See what you have done to me, my family and my children...See!"

Then it started, first as shoving back and forth and then she swung her fist squarely into his jaw. He staggered, felt his lip and spat out blood. Then, like a race horse out of the starting gate, he lit into her with his fists, pummelling her face, her stomach and her ribs. She punched back but he was too quick for her. He threw her to the ground and yanked off her blouse, tearing it clean down the middle. Then, he pulled her over to the bed and pinned her hands above her head. She was shouting all kinds of obscenities. Then it came to mind that if he continued to hit her with his hands, he might injure her. He should probably get a whip or a belt. He left her and went into the dressing room.

The freedom allowed her to run downstairs. Unable to find his weapon of choice, he ran after her. He did not want her to get out because then, the entire neighbourhood would know what was going on. Moreover, fighting outside the house would be affording a very uncommon sight to the public. She ran straight into the kitchen and grabbed a kitchen knife. He did not see the knife until she slashed at his chest and he jumped backwards. Had she been accurate, the knife would have cut his diaphragm in two. He fell to the ground and felt his hands touch a metal object. He grabbed it and stood up immediately. Blood was gushing out his chest. She was struggling with the door which refused to open. The knife was still in her left hand. He lunged forward, grabbed the collar of her dress and pulled her roughly towards him. She uttered a low howl, dropped the knife and clutched her throat as she saw the ratchet rise to meet her. He did not hit her with it. He spun nimbly, got hold of her arms and flung her back into the room. She landed against the kitchen door then crumbled into a heap on the floor, burying her head in the folds of her billowing Leso. He kicked the knife then walked out through the living room door which wasn't locked.

For a while, he stood on the dark veranda struggling to control his temper. He wondered whether he ought to return and bring justice to his reputation. The stick and ratchet in his left hand were cold

and heavy. He stared at them with repulsion, not quite certain how his hands came to be holding them. He clutched them tightly in order to overcome his own revulsion and then did what his every instinct told him to do—drop his arsenal on the ground and run back inside the house.

Amu never quite believed what he saw next. He was so confused and shattered by it that he did not know what to do. Sembe was huddled amid scattered shoes that had fallen off the shoe rack. She was whimpering on the floor, holding her knees to her chest and rocking from side to side in agony. There was a stream of blood around her, as though she were bleeding from numerous parts of her body. For a moment, he was completely paralysed with fright. He could never have imagined that something so awful would happen to him. He tried to pull himself together, though, still shivering from head to toe. The initial uncertainty was followed by a rapid decision. She needed to get to the hospital fast. He ran upstairs and grabbed the car keys. He changed his shirt and came down. He picked her up, put her into the car and drove to Westlands Hospital.

The emergency staff wheeled her in and Amu followed. His statement was brief. His wife had fallen down the staircase. Arrangements for admission were easy since Dr Owino, the family doctor, arrived almost immediately. Within no time, his wife was taken to an inner room amid a crowd of nurses and doctors. Amu was whisked to the waiting room. Sembe's condition was serious. She could even die. This was something he did not want to imagine. The worst part of the whole business was that he would be blamed for it and nobody would trust him anymore. The pain in his heart was so overbearing that he couldn't sit straight. His body slipped onto the carpet.

He was still lying there when one of the doctors came to talk to him.

"Mr Ndeda, your wife will be all right," he said with a smile on his face. "She only needs to rest a bit. Then, you can talk to her."

"Thanks, doctor."

"But there is something I must tell you."

"What is it, Sir?"

"It's about the baby."

"What baby?"

“She lost it, Mr Ndeda. We tried very hard but we couldn’t save both of them. It was too late. Now, Mr Ndeda, if you will come with me, I will show you to her room. She is still tired so she may not be able to talk much. I want you to stay for only a short while then go home, get some sleep.”

Sembe spent two weeks in the hospital. Within those two weeks, Amu had made three statements at the Kileleshwa Police station about a possible assault charge, received numerous insulting telephone calls from Sembe’s relatives and friends, and was visited thrice by Sembe’s pastor, asking him to go for counselling. In the eyes of the world, he was a dangerous man who was about to kill his wife. Even Beth had suspicions about him, although she was more accommodating than most. For her, it must have been the lesser of two evils. The only person who truly remained on his side was Cosmas.

When Sembe came home, they agreed that she should sleep in the guest wing until they ironed out their differences. This went on for months. Even after she went back to work, the situation never changed. What irritated Amu was that Sembe’s friends and relatives would visit her room as though it were in a separate house. They would never say a word to him, even if they found him in the kitchen or living room. Sometimes, these friends would stay late, talking and laughing as though they were in the bar or some other public place, much to his chagrin. When he asked Sembe to move back to their bedroom, she repeatedly declined. When he couldn’t bear it anymore, he gave her an ultimatum—move back to his bedroom or vacate the house altogether.

It took Sembe several days to ponder about her husband’s ultimatum. Initially, she was upbeat about reconciliation but, after consulting a few friends and relatives, and taking stock of the state of her emotional stability, her position changed completely. Ayugi convinced her that living with Amu was like committing suicide. A man who loves his wife would never hit her, let alone to the point of miscarriage. Moreover, she couldn’t expect Amu to love her as much as he loved Beth because she couldn’t give him a son. Her other friends, Ogotu and Tabitha, were never quite certain about what she should do. They understood her predicament but left it up to her to do what was best. They vowed to support her no matter

her decision. Gladys, her brother's wife, was categorical about seeking ways to sustain the marriage. She offered her a safe way out by suggesting that she move to Kambilamoshi for a few days. During that time, a meeting between them could be arranged so that Amu could come and apologise for what he did. Between Ayugi's radicalism and Tabitha's indecisiveness, she found Gladys's suggestion to be the more reasonable.

Although not outwardly showing it, the fact that she lost her baby in that house weighed heavily on her conscience. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't dislodge the disruptive emotion from her psyche. She knew that as long as she was still in Kileleshwa, the thought would never disappear. Every brick, corner, or piece of furniture in that house reminded her of the fateful night. Perhaps, it was time for her to take a break—spend some time away from Kileleshwa. Convinced that moving out was the best thing for her, Sembe packed all her belongings and left Kileleshwa on a Friday afternoon. She moved to her brother's house in Kambilamoshi where she stayed for a month, then moved to Mamboleo Estate off Thika Road.

Ayugi drove down Thika road, thoughts about the sinuousness of marriage slithered through her mind like a rattle snake. Until now, she had never imagined how precarious a marriage could be and the pain that a woman felt when separated from her husband. Helping Sembe move to Mamboleo and being part of her friend's fractured world had unmasked some of the hidden complexities and iffyness in her marriage. Suppose John, her husband, were to find another woman, maybe, a Ugandan like him, what would she do? When she thought of the consequences that a separation from John would have, her heart began to pound with nerve-racking intensity. Unlike Sembe, she had no job, no savings and no immediate relative in Nairobi who would take care of her. How would she survive? A vivid realisation that she was in a no better position than her friend, Sembe, made her shiver. She hunched over the steering wheel, gripping it tightly, her eyes fixed on the road as though it were the enemy.

Before, being without a job did not bother her. When they were first married, John convinced her to resign from her civil service position. At the time, it seemed like a small sacrifice to make. After all, he was providing for all her needs and more. As a Housing Officer in the Ministry, her salary could hardly cover lunch, car maintenance or even pay her beautician for a month. She went along with John, shunning all protestations from her mother and convincing herself that John's happiness was the most important thing. Moreover, it seemed the only thing to do. Her pregnancy came almost at the same time and the issue was sidelined. After Chad was born, she needed to stay at home to look after him. Since then, she had never felt the need to look for work.

Recently, she was beginning to feel somewhat inhibited. Being without a job curtailed her freedom to do things in her own right. Not that she lacked money or anything of the sort but, having struggled so much to attain a college degree, she needed to feel useful to herself and to society. She knew of no other way than to improve her career. Moreover, she felt as though she was losing on company and camaraderie of her friends. The feeling was aggravated by loneliness, especially after John started to spend many days away from home. Sometimes, he would be gone for days, weeks or even a month. Sometimes, he would be gone for a few days, come home for one day and then disappear for weeks. She understood John's absence to be the reason she had all the luxuries and the comfort but life wasn't all about material things—a realisation that was dawning on her after fifteen years of marriage. Now, seeing what Sembe was going through, Ayugi was convinced that she needed security, something to fall back on in the event that the marriage failed.

When she got home, John was at the door to meet her. Apparently, he had been waiting for her. He had a glass in his hands and his mood was unusually jovial.

"I have been waiting for you," he said, barely able to conceal his enthusiasm.

"Oh really?" she asked. "And why might that be?"

"So that...."

He tried to kiss her but she brushed him aside and went into the kitchen. She wanted to see her son. With John absent all the time, Chad became the centre of her life and possibly the main thread

that held her marriage together. Whenever she and John had one of their many disagreements, she found solace in talking to him. Since she was late, she wanted to be sure that he had done his homework. Chad was at Glenbrook School where the teachers made heavy demands on their pupils as well as the parents. Finding nobody in the kitchen, she placed her tote bag on the granite work top then went back to the living room.

"There she is, my queen. What is going on today, sweetheart?" John shouted, while coming closer to her.

"Don't sweetheart me, John. Where have you been the last two days?"

"In Kampala, making them doughnuts for us. Come see what I got for you."

"I will see it later. I need to sit and relax for a while."

"Come on. I need to show it to you now. Aren't you curious?"

"No, John. Just give me time. Don't you even want to know how my day has been?"

"I know how it has been. You went shopping. Come on."

"Is that what you think I do, John? Shopping with your money? Well, I have news for you, Mr. I'm going to find myself a job."

"I didn't mean it like that. But, hey, who doesn't like shopping? At least I do. That is why I bought you some. Don't you want to see them?"

"No, not now, John."

When she was adamant, he went into the bar and fixed a drink. He sat by the nook, looking dejected. His euphoria had evaporated, replaced by unsettling melancholy. She did not like seeing him like that. After about ten minutes of rumination, she went to him and slid her left arm around his waist. She put her head on his shoulder, letting him feel the rubbing of her voluptuous breasts. Her right hand slithered further down to his crotch and made a little mischief in that area. She knew that her activity was bound to arouse his venereal instincts, putting him in a state where he had to listen to her—and that is all she needed from him today. But, when she continued on that path, she felt a twinge of sexual thrill seeping through her body. She did not want to stop.

"What is going on, sweetheart?" he asked. His voice was croaky and coarse.

“Nothing, only that you seem so tense. Is it something to do with your Kampala trip?”

“I am not tense. It is you who is tense.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“I just wanted to tell you something, John, but you didn’t want to listen. That’s all,” she said, rubbing his chest.

“What is it that you wanted to talk about?”

She kissed him so tenderly, making him shake and quiver. Then, she backed off abruptly as though she had been stung by a bee. He pulled her but there was already a gap between them.

“You want to hear it now or later?” she chuckled.

John must have read her mind. “Right now, baby...or, maybe, later...Hell, whatever you want!”

“I want to tell you right now but it seems you have other things on your mind,” she said, hoping to capture his rapt attention.

“No. What I have in mind might take long. Tell me, baby, I’m listening.”

“It’s about Sembe. She left Kambilamoshi today. Will you help her find a good lawyer and help her with her legal costs?”

“I told you that I would. Didn’t I? Don’t ever doubt me. Let that not bother you. I will even ensure that she gets that beautiful house...”

She kissed him again. This time, making it last even longer. When she pulled away, he gasped for air.

“Can we go upstairs now?” he asked.

“I am waiting for you, Daddy.”

John liked it when she called him “Daddy”. He rose from the stool and held her hand, pulling her towards the stairs.

Chapter Eight

AMU COULDN'T remember what it felt like to live in the big house without Sembe. Last time when she left in anger, the separation was short; a mere one night stint that barely lent itself to complete rumination. During that brief period, a part of him had felt the burden of marriage lifted and a space created for the fullest enjoyment of life. The heart that had sagged under the hostility he felt towards his wife was livened by the vain hope that Beth could replace Sembe forever. This feeling could have brought him to the threshold of peace in his inner self—the self that hankered for survival outside Sembe's marital cocoon. But it never did. Also, it never spurred any tangible reaction that might have indicated his disposition to the world then, which was no less than the severance of the marriage. Maybe, it was because the situation changed so rapidly. Maybe, he wasn't really prepared for any drastic change in his life. Whatever it was, his wife came back and their relationship improved almost to perfection. But that did not last long. All the simmering uncertainties, the unresolved fears of the past and the hostility resurfaced once again, precipitating in an ugly confrontation. In the end, nothing could be done to bridge their differences. He had to contend with living alone, for now, and hope that he could still find happiness without her.

Whatever space Sembe's departure afforded him, it was constricted by the challenges of single parenthood. Everything, from the interminable household chores to the children's pestiferous demands, seemed more arduous than usual. When he wandered the isles of the supermarket, unable to make up his mind about which items to buy, or dirty clothes invaded his bedroom so that he had nothing to wear on a Monday morning, a feeling of ineptitude crept over him. Then, he would be reminded that his wife's departure had put a big dent in his life. The woman was the cornerstone of his life. Her absence meant that he would have to endure the pain of fulfilling the inexorable demands of his household, however

disdainful the experience was. Undoubtedly, some middle-aged education on the vital aspects of household management was due, more so to help deflect the stress emanating from his attempt to do everything by himself and having nobody to blame in the event of failure. He had to learn to delegate and, indeed, things began to improve when he placed a lot of responsibility in the hands Odongo and Salama. This left him with mere supervision, a task that could easily be accomplished, even over the telephone.

Nonetheless, he still couldn't find time to overindulge in the evenings. So, he lost interest in going to The Closet and did not miss his drinking friends. His life gravitated towards spending more time with his children at home. Fortunately, the agoraphobia also reduced the complexity of his daily routine. He would get off work and go straight home to help the children with their homework and ensure that supper was made early. Thereafter, he would watch television and then go to sleep. In his view, keeping away from the world allowed him the opportunity to reminisce about the direction of his life and, maybe, contrive better plans for the future. But such a disposition did not stymie the lingering thought that Sembe might device a scheme to come back as she did last time, thus creating some urgency in deciding the fate of his relationship with Beth and Moses.

Paradoxically, Beth's attitude seemed to have changed after she learned that Sembe had left home. She did not call him at all and, when he took the initiative to look for her or left word at her office, she never returned the favour. Ultimately, when he found her and asked her to visit Kileleshwa, she flatly refused. She also turned down his invitations for lunch or dinner. For a while, this did not bother him. Probably, Beth was giving him time to acclimatise to the new domestic situation. When two weeks went by and things did not change, Amu began to suspect that Beth had found another lover. With a little resentment budding inside him, he elected to find out what was going on. One afternoon after work, he decided to visit Beth's apartment without invitation. He found her lying on the sofa, reading. She wore a silky nightgown and thick cotton socks clad her feet. The tight braids stuck out of her head like dark ribbons.

"I'm sorry that I had to barge in like this, I just thought I should come by in case something was wrong. Is everything okay?" he asked.

"I am fine, feeling a little tired, that's all," She responded in a low voice that blended superbly with the quiescent atmosphere in the room. "How are things with you and the children?"

"We are all right, I guess. Where is Moses?" he said, helping himself to the love seat, barely a foot from his host.

"He went to visit his aunt in Otiende," she said, rising from her seat to go into the kitchen. She came back with a mug of hot tea and some biscuits, which she put on a glass-topped coffee table next to him. "So, what are you going to do—I mean about your wife and all?" she asked.

Beth's question caught him off guard, given that her attitude towards him had not been all that encouraging. His first reaction was to avoid the subject but what else was there to talk about, other than him and his estranged wife? "I don't know yet," he said truthfully. "I am thinking, maybe divorce, separation... I don't know."

They sat in silence as he tried to discern the subtleties of her unpredictable mind. When they were dating, she neither talked about Sembe nor bothered about her feelings. She never talked about marriage either. Polygamy wasn't illegal in Kenya and she could very well have insisted that he marry her as a second wife. But she rarely even made insinuations that pointed in that direction. Even in those rare occasions when she did, it was in an abstract and hypothetical frame that concealed her preferences and prejudices. She was a strange person indeed, he thought, unpredictable in many ways but she could be authentically affectionate if she chose to. Now, he wasn't sure she still had any feelings for him and that bothered him somewhat.

She must have noticed his bewilderment. "Amu, there is something I wanted to seek your opinion about, and it has been in my mind for a while now," she said in a submissive tone.

"I am all ears."

"I found a job in Kisumu. Should I take it?"

Relieved that it wasn't something upsetting like marriage or pregnancy and, carefully avoiding any disagreement, he answered hurriedly. "By all means, take it if it pays decently and is challenging enough..."

"The pay is good but I was hoping that it would give me an opportunity to live on the plot we bought in Kibos—do you remember it?"

"Oh, yes, I do but the title deeds are still at the lawyer's office because some money is still owing. It is five thousand or something like that?"

"One thousand eight hundred shillings. I paid the money last week and took the title deed."

"Oh, you did? That's fine," he sighed.

"Well, I have decided to live on that land while working in Kisumu. I feel kind of sad about leaving Nairobi but you know sometimes a change is as good as a rest. Moreover, I can still come and visit," she chuckled, indicating that the decision to relocate was made much earlier than last week.

He sighed, exasperated, "I thought the house on that land was burned down by cane fires?"

"No, that was just the shed. The main house was never affected. Now, it looks good after it was painted and fenced. You should see it..."

"So, when do you... er...er... plan to on leave?" he stuttered.

"On Sunday...this Sunday. They are sending a truck to pick up my things," she chuckled, obviously excited about the whole arrangement.

Amu was offended. After a long moment of silence, he rose and sat sullenly on the coffee table next to the door. "When were you planning to tell me?" he inquired in a petulant voice.

Beth knew her lover only too well. He wasn't quite pleased with being kept in the dark. She lowered herself to the chair and faced him. Then, she started to act as though she were dependent on him for everything; contorting her face to show vulnerability, moving her flabby hands to his shoulders and bending her neck so that he could be tickled by the pointed ends of her braids. When she rested her upper body weight on his chest and wiggled as though she were about to fall, he brought the strength of both his arms to her sides and held her. She knew he loved being in control. She looked up into his face and said, "I was going to call you tonight...believe me. Anyway, Amu, you know I could never make such a decision without consulting you. In fact, it is good you came...Are you annoyed with me, dear?" she asked, her remorse vivid in the tone of voice.

Slightly mollified by her show of penitence, he cleared his throat, rose again and sat next to her on the sofa. "No, I am not," he lied. "Just a little surprised, that's all."

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. Her unobtrusive manipulation had succeeded yet again. Men, they are like children, she thought, always to be wrapped around the little finger.

Nothing else Beth said that evening would have touched him more. He adored her but the thought that she could have made such big plans without informing him firsthand, incensed him. He took a deep breath, knowing that he would have to accept the inevitable. His belief that Beth would come running to his arms if Sembe left, seemed so far-fetched. The girl had a mind of her own and, for now, her plans did not seem to include him. He wondered what she had in store for Moses.

"So, what are you going to do with Moses?" he asked.

"What do you mean? I will be with him."

"Oh," he sighed, deciding not to push the matter further.

When he arrived home, he dumped his briefcase on the dining table then he went to his bedroom. Strangely, he found himself thinking of Sembe in an intimate and romantic sense. He walked slowly to his bed and sat down gently. He reached out to her side of the bed, grabbed the pillow with both his hands and held it to his face. He closed his eyes, breathing deeply of her scent. The soothing smell of her perfume penetrated his senses like a hunter's knife on a deer's skin. To his mind came the memories of their happy days together. He remembered the day he had dropped her at the college after an afternoon of watching some video tapes in his High End house. Naomi Ogot later admitted that it was a plan to leave the two of them alone so that he could have an opportunity to know her and she to know him. It worked. When she gracefully stepped out of the car, she invited him to her room. That was his first time to step into the women's halls of residence at the university, or Box, as they were popularly referred to. But, his surprise came when she invited him to visit whenever he pleased. And, when he asked whether he could visit the following Friday, she agreed. His hands fluttered to his knees as he warmed to the anticipation of visiting her alone and in his own right. The glow was also caused by pride, of course, at having passed the initial test. He knew that he was certainly on a path to victory.

In the days that followed, he visited many times and all his requests for a date met resistance of one kind or another. Sometimes, it was her sister who was to visit, sometimes she was going to see her brother in Kambilamoshi and the list seemed endless. When he was in the Box, she would surely warm up to his presence but she never intimated any change of attitude or desire to be with him elsewhere other than her room and in the presence of Ayugi, her friend. He would have given up if it were not for Naomi asking him for a lift to some rugby game. Apparently, it wasn't Naomi alone who wanted to go, but a team of four girls including Sembe. Although he wasn't particularly fond of rugby, he decided to remain out there until the game ended. The game also provided ample opportunity to talk with her. It was then that she agreed to go with him to The Resort, an exquisite nightspot on the fringes of Nairobi National Park, the next weekend.

After the game, he dropped the other girls at the Box, but took her out for dinner. She had hesitated for a while but, when urged by Naomi and assured that he would bring her back before nine o'clock, she reluctantly agreed. They had hamburgers and sodas at Monte Carlo on Tubman Road and afterwards some milk shakes at Iceland. Later, they strolled down the streets, allowing the cool evening breeze to flutter gently through their clothing. They wandered through the arcade on Nyatta Avenue and then turned into Nange Street, admiring the mixture of clothes and shoes that were displayed on the shop windows. At one point, he held her hands and skilfully attempted to draw her closer to him. She was quick to notice his guile and pulled away, smiling. "One day I will get you. One day, you will be mine," he sighed after several failed attempts.

"How sure are you?" she asked, obviously intending to provoke his sense of longing.

"I am praying to God and I know He answers prayers," said he, resigning to the will of the Almighty.

"Have you heard of St Theresa of Avila?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, she once commented that 'more tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered prayers'. Be careful what you wish for, Amu Ndeda. You might just get it."

"And then, I may be in tears?"

“That’s right, you may regret it,” she affirmed with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“Let it be so but, still, my regrets will be better than my torment right now.”

“Are you that worse off? I wish I could help.”

And with that, she took off running, not waiting for his response. He followed and when he caught up with her, he held her close to his chest. She was breathing heavily. He looked into her eyes, the gap between her white teeth and he was at a loss for words. She was beautiful beyond his wildest dreams. The rosy smell of her hair, the perfume that bathed her body and the mint of her breath made him feel like a starving man who stumbles onto a four course meal. For the next few seconds, he surrendered to the pure pleasure of being with her. After a moment of befuddled silence, he released his hold on her, slowly, letting her stretch her billowing skirt.

“I will take you home, now,” he managed to say, the timbre of his croaky voice rising above the ambling evening breeze.

The following weekend, they went to The Resort. When he dropped her off at the Box later that night, she came close to him and whispered, “Amu Ndeda, I like you very much, and I think I am falling in love with you. Good night. Please call me.” Then, she ran up the steps and into the building, never giving him a chance to say anything. As he drove home that night, he thanked the Almighty, the living God for answering his prayers. After that night, there were movies, dinners in the city, night walks in the streets and more visits. During these excursions, he came to learn a lot about her family. Like him, she grew up in the village and attended local schools. Although she had been to Nairobi once or twice to see her brother, it was university education that brought her here to stay. She took pride in that and often extolled the virtues of village life. Amu liked her simplicity, and was fascinated by her perspective on gender relations in the African setting. He wasn’t as informed as she was, but never missed something to say.

Then, she agreed to visit his High End residence. Her intended visit was a romantic and an aesthetic experience that required precise preparation. He spent time cleaning and brushing all the corners of the house, including the vacant bedroom on the upper floor. The bathroom was scrubbed spotless and the kitchen cleaned and rearranged. The carpet in the living room was vacuumed several

times over and the windows wiped to a crystal sparkle. As if all these were not enough, lavender scent was the sprayed courtesy of the latest air freshening formula he had purchased from Family Supplies supermarket on Gojo Road. It mattered to him that she had the best first impression of him and his roommate.

That afternoon, Amu the quintessential, turned into a beacon of human kindness, eager to please and obsequiously ready to perform her bidding. His actions became almost erratic as he strove to please her with every move, deed and word. But she did not demand much. She sat calmly, innocuously letting him play host in whatever manner he deemed fit. Soon, he emerged from the kitchen with a cold glass of soda which she accepted with a smile. While they were seated on the couch and talking, Cosmas, his roommate at the time, and Naomi, his girlfriend, arrived and the house was swept into a celebratory mood. The women took off to the kitchen and soon the sweet scent of curried beef, fried *Sukuma Wiki* and *Chapati* mingled with the aroma of boiling rice wafted to their nostrils. Cosmas jauntily congratulated his roommate on his good fortune. Although he took the compliment grudgingly, only admitting that, so far, everything looked good but the future was still uncertain, deep inside, his roommate's approval boosted his confidence.

He took her back to college after dinner. Thereafter, she became a regular visitor to his place. At first, the visits were short, a mere three or four hour sojourn on Friday evenings with just enough time to make dinner and her favourite *Mandazis*, enough to last Amu a whole week and a few for her friends at the Box. In later days, her visits became longer and, eventually, she began to spend nights there. On such occasions, they would watch movies on his video, play Monopoly and talk until dawn. On Saturdays, she would stay to help clean the house and to cook for him. Then, she would dress in his jeans and one of his T-shirts. Her excuse was that his shirt was big and loose and therefore comfortable enough to allow her do the household chores. The truth, which she hardly ever admitted, was that she liked being able to smell him on her skin. His clothes carried his scent which made her feel a closeness to his body.

Their love grew by leaps and bounds in the period leading to her graduation in May. By the time she was to leave college, the telltale signs of an impending marriage were more than visible. Cosmas

had moved out of the High End house to live on his own in a city council house in Adams Arcade. Left alone in the big house, Amu hired a houseboy, a nondescript villager brought to him by their accounts supervisor, Mr Peter Wanyonyi. The houseboy did not survive his second month because he fell out of favour with Sembe. Thus, in the evenings he was on his own, roaming the vast three bedroom house but hoping that, soon, his loneliness might come to an end. On her last day at college, Amu picked her up, intending to drop her at her brother's place in Kambilamoshi, but they ended up in High End...

The painful memory of the past laved his conscience like the thick morning mist of Limuru, driving away sleep and arousing his sensibilities to the reality of his wife's departure. Since Sembe had neither called nor come home for two weeks, it was prudent to conclude that she wasn't interested in salvaging the marriage. Not that he was particularly keen on accepting her back, but the feeling that she needed him would be pleasing. Believing that he could do nothing to attenuate the damage already done, he decided to inform his relatives about the separation the next day. He particularly wanted Auntie Didi to know because he was sure that he would need her help in the near future.

Sembe was never accustomed to a life of her own. She did not know where to pay electric, water or even telephone bills. As for the car, she only knew how to drive. She had never put in fuel, changed a tyre or taken a car for a service. All these were done by Amu. Whenever a tyre was flat, she would look for the nearest telephone and call him. In most cases, he would bring the Volvo and she would drive to wherever she was going, leaving him to sort out the problem. Sometimes he would send Kioko, his driver, to take care of the matter. Until carjacking increased in Nairobi, he would fill up the tank with enough fuel to last her a week. Now that she thought about it, he never complained about this. Perhaps he was the domineering type; the kind haunted by the fear of being perceived as being less of a man because of his failure to meet this or that demand by his family however trivial, or inconsequential it

might be. Maybe, he was just a responsible husband, one of those that unmarried girls romanticise about as the stereotypical Mr Right. Now, they were apart and the hope that she could fashion a successful life out of the little she had was being severely tested by her meagre knowledge of these mundane aspects of city life.

Last night, she came face to face with the reality of her situation. She was leaving work for home when the car wouldn't start. Apparently, it had not been serviced since she left Kileleshwa. Since she did not have enough money for a taxi fare, she opted to catch a bus. She had done this previously when she had a flat tyre and everybody had left for the day. During those days, she was still living with her brother in Kambilamoshi, only a short distance from her office. She darted up Tom Street, weaving through the dense mass of humanity released from their corporate cages, and took a route 145 bus at Nation House. The bus was full to the brim with hardly any space to stand or breathe. The mischievous men squeezed their bodies against the women hoping, in some bizarre way, to attract their attention while the women clung to their purses as though their lives depended on it.

As the bus approached Karani, the conductor came round to ask her for the twenty shillings fare. After rummaging through her purse she discovered that her money was missing, together with her national identity card and her driver's licence. She attempted to explain her predicament to the conductor but he would not listen. He must have thought that she was trying to get a free ride, an occurrence not uncommon in a city where poverty constantly stared people in the eye. He did not talk to her. He merely signalled for the driver to stop. She was thrown off the bus, her purse flapping on her sides like a fish dying on its hook. Though embarrassed, she had little time to be pulverised by the ignominy of her situation. The light of day was already giving way to the darkness of the night and the dangers were all too obvious. With no money and no means of seeking help, she grated at the unpalatable option of walking all the way to her house in Mamboleo. But, she mustered courage and swiftly swung the purse to her shoulders. Instinctively, she removed her high heeled shoes, choosing to attack the tarmac with her bare feet. As she walked, her breath smoked around her and her bare feet slapped hard on the warm tarmac surface.

Fortunately, three men emerged from the nearby sports complex and were talking loudly in *Kamba*. They, too, were heading to Mamboleo. They did not talk to her but she kept in their sight for the entire one-hour walk. When she got home, her feet were swollen and she could barely stand.

Although the unusual decision to move out of Kileleshwa had wrought upon her some difficulties, she found it to be a giant step from being emotionally victimised in a bad marriage. She felt at peace with herself, not disappointment in her actions. For the first time in her life, she felt safe from the fear that she could never have a fulfilling life without Amu. But even as she pondered about the progress she was making in establishing herself as an independent being, the thought of the essence of marriage in her society lingered on her conscience. What was a woman supposed to do to maintain her status? She had been a good wife to Amu and a good mother to his children. Never, even once, did she cheat on him, even when it had been so tempting. She remembered Kobe. Yes, Kobe, the rich civil servant from coast province. How that man had died for her, it was unbelievable. They were in Mombasa for a seminar and all her workmates paired up with men and heaven knows what they did after dark. Kobe had an eye for her and would not stop pestering her even after she showed him pictures of Amu and her three daughters. He called her *Malaika*, *Kipusa*, *Almasi* and all those adorable names that Amu had long forgotten. After the seminar, Kobe kept in touch. Whenever he was in Nairobi, he came by her office to greet her. When Kobe went to England, he bought her an exquisite Swiss watch that was still languishing in her office safe. But, he never got what he wanted. She knew Kobe had a wife, or maybe two, since he was that rich. Kobe was later transferred to Nairobi to work in the Directorate of Personnel Training Division of the Office of the President. He had persisted in his endeavour. Whenever they met, he jokingly asked whether she had changed her mind. She often replied that she had not but, when she did, he would be the first to know. "Men, they are beasts!" she said and laughed loudly.

The noise must have attracted the attention of Toni, her next door neighbour, who had been of much assistance when she first came to Mamboleo. That day when Ayugi and she brought her

things, Toni was around. He introduced her to the surroundings and even took her to the Kiosk nearby. Later that night, he brought her some food and drinks. In the days that followed, Toni helped her to settle into the new house. He gave her a table, some kitchenware and curtains for her bedroom windows. He was kind and gentle and very open about himself, something that endeared him to her. Sembe learned that he was divorced and that his ex-wife was living in Canada with their only child. Despite his marital circumstances, he was always very reassuring. He believed that divorce should never devastate a person, but galvanise her experience making her more adroit in dealing with the difficult circumstances of life. She found happiness in talking to him, a person with whom she could share experiences on a matter that society discouraged and frowned upon.

Toni was knocking at her door. As she rose to open it for him, she remembered that the door was unlocked. "Hello, Sembe. I thought you had a visitor," he said as he slipped inside.

"No, I just remembered some funny joke about a friend of mine and I laughed."

"Oh! Otherwise, how are you?"

"I am fine. I had the car fixed this morning."

"Yes, I saw it out there. In the future, don't take the bus. Give me a call and I will come for you. It is very dangerous to walk at night around here, you know."

"Thanks, Toni."

"By the way, we are going to town with a friend of mine. Do you want to come?"

"No, but thanks for inviting me."

"See you. Have a good night."

He disappeared. Sembe locked the door and went to the bedroom.

Chapter Nine

THE SMALL VILLAGE of Kodegi lay at the heart of *Luo* country, about four hundred kilometres from the capital, Nairobi. If you wanted to go there, you would first get to Kisumu, the largest town on the Kenyan side of Lake Victoria and then take the tarmac road towards Boma. On reaching Siala, you had two choices: either keep to the main road until you reached Lusi, or branch onto the tarmac road passing by the shores of the lake to the famous port of Homa, then take a murram road up the hills past Akado Ponge, Got Rachar and, finally, Lusi. This option would be longer but worth the trip because you would be able to see the famous Namba Winam and, even stop at the Big Fig Resort for a hearty meal of fresh *Ngege* and *Kuon Odongo Ober*. If you had time, you could dance to the famous tunes of the Waya Mamit, Benga Boys and the late Omogi Wuon Thum. Also, you would be able to see Kiriwa Mission, the headquarters of the Seventh Day Adventists' churches in the Obaso Field Sub Region and the famous Kiriwa High School and hospital. From Lusi you would take the murram road leading to Kombok Chief's camp and, once there, branch onto a narrow road leading to Ngeso market. The road takes you to the intersection at the centre of the village—a place known locally as “Jan'gson”, a local corruption of the word “junction”. Here, you would ask, because two roads intersect. One road leads downhill to Ngeso market, the other to Lolwe Primary School. The other two roads lead to the chief's camp and to Kondiala village in the east.

Jang'son was a famous locale, not only for being at the centre of the village, but also because it had a small kiosk where villagers could buy little items without going all the way to Lusi. From Jan'gson, one could see Jakwath Patroba Ndeda's home or, at least, the iron roofs of the building in his compound. To the west, one was faced with undulating hills covered with shrubs, stretching all

the way to the God Mesa. The hills were punctuated by the big Awach River which marked the border line between Kodegi and Kombogo village. Farther down the road was Lolwe Primary School—a local school that abutted a small forest reserve manned by the local Lutheran Church. The school was a source of pride for most villagers. Whenever one was introducing oneself, they would mention that their home is near Lolwe Primary School. Despite such prominence, the buildings at the school were nothing to write home about. The school block was one long semi-permanent building that sat in the middle of a ten acre plot of land, encircled by a euphorbia fence. The building had neither doors nor windows. Its mud walls were cracked and the floor so rough and dusty that during school days, water had to be sprinkled on it before lessons began. A visitor got the impression that the building was still under construction. So it had been for many years.

The school bordered the Seventh Day Adventist Church whose compound was dominated by a single stone building. Jakwath Patroba Ndeda Ogiti was a lay preacher and head of this church. By village standards, Jakwath was a very successful man. He had a large piece of land on which he grew maize, sweet potatoes, bananas and finger millet. He also had a flock of farm animals. For him, religion and wealth were inextricably intertwined; wealth being a gift from God that no man could refuse. Despite his riches, Jakwath Patroba never shunned hard work. When he wasn't busy in his office at the church, or wasn't at a church function away from home, he would work on his farm with his own hands. He loathed indolence and behoved his flock to do the same.

Jakwath Patroba wore his religion like a cloth. He had little time for Christians of other denominations, especially Sunday worshippers, lambasting their beliefs as based on the misreading of the Bible. But, Jakwath was first and foremost a *Luo*. He had grown up in its culture and was part of its community. When he married his wife, Valerina Atieno, daughter of Pastor Abednego Winga of Kogelo, it was through a wedding that was organised by the church. This was after he paid bride price, both *Ayie* and cattle, and also visited his in-laws as required by custom. Thus, his conscience was never disturbed by the apparent mix of tradition and Christianity in his life. He believed that the consequence of his faith should not

make him a lesser *Luo*, but a better one. Exactly how this could be achieved seemed not to have any clear guidelines. While in his view, the distinction between *Jo-piny* (earthly people) and *Jo-polo* (heavenly people) was necessary, the world of his village wasn't yet perfectly suited for a complete abandonment of tradition, but the time would soon come. One would think that this belief should have been the *point d'appui* of his messages to the members of his church—far from it. In church, Jakwath Patroba was as pious as ever, dismissing the objects of tradition, vilifying its believers and proclaiming that Jesus Christ had conquered all worldly things including custom and consigned them to *Gehena*, the perpetual hellish fire. This contradiction of deed and word never bothered him, and not in the least did it tamper with his authority in the church. Apart from inconsequential gibes from the likes of Janabi, the church community was happy to follow their *Jakwath*.

Thus, in Jakwath Patroba's world, things seemed to be fine until the news about Amu's marriage troubles reached him. The news was delivered rather unofficially through Janabi's wayward son, Maira, who came home for the first time in five years. Apparently, he had brought his wife, a *Kikuyu*, well actually a *Meru*, but the villagers couldn't tell the difference, and dumped her with his parents. He went back to Nairobi the next day. For most villagers, the story of the strange girl who could hardly speak *Luo*, but Swahili, overshadowed anything the young man might have said or done. The villagers were absorbed in their study of the woman as if she were an anthropological specimen. Everywhere there were questions. Where is she from? What does she eat? Does she know how to cook? Can she prepare *Ngege*? Has anybody ever talked to her? The sarcastic ones lamented the curse that the young man had brought upon his mother. To them, bringing a woman unfamiliar with the culture of the village was a careless act of debauchery which could attract ill omen.

During his short stay, Maira mentioned to his parents that Amu had divorced Sembe and was planning to marry Beth, a woman with whom he had a son. It was this information that brought Janabi to see Jakwath Patroba and his wife, Valerina, on this sunny afternoon.

"That is what the kid told me. You see, last time when I was in Nairobi the trouble had just started and I kind of thought something like this would later happen," Janabi concluded after narrating the story.

"I knew that *Nyar Komogi* was a tough-headed girl and that's what I told Amu the very first day I saw that woman. But, you know a person who has set his eyes on marriage can never be advised," Valerina remarked.

"You see, the problem may not be with her alone," said Janabi, keen to maintain balance in the discussion.

"Janabi, you don't know these educated women," she protested. "Of course, she may have been treating you well whenever you were in town. But, I tell you these women are like rats, they bite you and lube you at the same time."

"Last time I was in Nairobi she had left him but, you know, I convinced her to come back," Janabi said with some sense of pride. "It was about the same woman from Kano."

"Does he want to marry her?" Valerina inquired.

"I don't know. Now that they have a son together, perhaps he does."

"Is she the reason *Nyar Komogi* left this time?"

"This time they fought. He beat her, so I hear, very badly."

Jakwath Patroba who had been quiet the whole time asked, "So where did she go to?"

"I understand she went to her brother's place," Janabi answered.

"That brother of hers who works at the railways?" Jakwath Patroba inquired.

"Yes," Janabi answered immediately.

"Oh! So, I guess they will be calling us for a meeting to discuss the matter?"

"I don't know about that. Perhaps we should wait to hear from Amu. He might be able to shed light on the whole issue," Valerina observed.

Jakwath Patroba asked, "But this brother, which estate does he live in?"

"Kambilamoshi," said Janabi.

"Well, last Sabbath, Olela's daughter came to church. She had come to see her sick mother and then decided to fellowship with us. You know she also lives in Nairobi with her husband. *Min* Amu, what is the name of that estate where she said they were living?" he asked, turning to his wife.

“Mamba or was it Mambo? I can’t remember,” she promptly replied.

“She lives in that Mabas Estate, or whatever its name is. She saw *Nyar Komogi* in that estate and, when she inquired, somebody mentioned that she was living there. She did not know the truth about the matter and we decided not to probe her too much. Now, according to Maira, she is with her brother. So, which is which?”

Janabi responded, “I don’t know. Maybe, she was just visiting that Mamba place. I don’t know.”

It wasn’t until the following week that the matter gained some clarity. Jakwath Patroba Ndeda and his wife received a letter from Auntie Didi, which informed them that Amu had chased away Sembe but was still keeping the children. According to her, the situation wasn’t good. She invited them to come to Nairobi as soon as they possibly could so that they could talk to Amu. Jakwath Patroba never understood the logic of going to Nairobi. If *Nyar Komogi*’s parents were in the village, with whom was he going to discuss the matter of his son and their daughter in the city? But, his wife opted to go, at least so that she could know what was going on, if not to resolve the matter altogether.

Aboke carried the water basin into the house and sat on the wooden stool next to her bedroom door. As she lowered her foot into the warm soothing water, she heard Siprina, her co-wife, yelling at the top of her voice. What was the problem now, she wondered. It was only yesterday, when the family had a meeting to resolve the dispute between her and the husband. Siprina was about as old as her son, Tim. She had what the *Luo* call “*Lend Jachien*”. She was quick with her words and very hot-tempered. Her constant nagging, quarrels and fights had become a permanent feature of their relationship. Sometimes, he would even regret having married her. Now, the tempo of her speech was rising and the man was also talking. Eager to get the gist of what the belligerents were up to, she moved to the bedroom, sat on the bed and opened the wooden window slightly.

"You will know who I am now if you continue saying those things," the man was threatening.

"I will not stop. Tell me, what kind of man leaves his children without clothes? What man?" Siprina shouted back.

"Come here...come here ..I say, come here, Siprina ..."

"I am not coming and you can do what you want. Don't think I am a child. You married me. I am also your wife...You can call those brothers of yours but you will not silence me. You will know that I am the daughter of Nyakach, proper... Even if you kill me," she was saying, obviously determined to pursue her case.

"Siprina, don't let me follow you. Come here," her husband insisted.

"I will not come *yaye akoni*... if you want a woman to come near you, why don't you go to your wife? Is she not waiting for you in the house? The loved one... Hahaaaa Auuuuu... or in her case, she is the one who orders you around and then you want to tell me what?...My children have no clothes, their school fees are not paid and I walk in rags as though I am a widow. Today, heee...I am not coming."

"All right *nyar jachien*, go and go for good. I don't want you in my home," he shouted back. "I am tired of you, woman."

"I will go. How do you expect me to stay in a haunted home where even young children are bewitched? They cannot keep husbands. How do you expect me to stay? In fact, don't bother about me because I'm going. Bother about your beloved educated daughter who has thrown her husband away like a sack of potatoes...is that not enough worry for you?"

From her bedroom, Aboke could hear everything. Siprina's words pierced her heart like a *Maasai* sword into the belly of a fallen game. This was the second time in one day that somebody was talking about her daughter, Sembe. Earlier, at the river, a woman from the neighbouring Kodiolo Clan was saying how educated girls can never have successful marriages. She narrated to everybody who cared to listen a story about a girl from a village up the hill, living and working in Nairobi, who had recently decided that she needed a husband no more because she had money to look after herself and the children. Aboke did not know what to make of the discussion. As far as she knew, her daughter was the only woman up the hill who was a

graduate and was working and living in Nairobi. She had decided to discuss the matter with her husband later that evening, only to come home to a raging inferno. Now, Siprina was confirming her fears in the worst way possible.

The asininity of her words must have provoked a lot of anger in him. Suddenly, with the fury of a wounded lion, he dashed towards her with a huge wooden perch in his hand. She leaped forward and ran towards the back of the homestead. He took a short-cut between the kitchen and the grass-thatched hut, determined to discipline her. In the stroke of a second, Aboke saw the huge body of her husband slump onto the ground like a sagging bag. His legs twisted as the torso rolled down towards a canopy of banana bush, next to the animal enclosure. “*Mayie!*” she shouted, rushing outside her house. When she got there, he was unable to sit up. He had slipped on a wet banana peel and was unable to maintain his balance because he was in motion.

“See how you can hurt yourself for nothing—because of unnecessary quarrelling with that *Alelo* woman of yours,” Aboke lamented.

“It’s my ankle. I think I have twisted it because of that evil woman. I am going to kill her,” he said attempting to get up. “*Aiiiiiii!*” he cried then stopped.

Aboke noticed that he was in a lot of pain. By this time, Siprina had come back to her house. She was still in a belligerent mood because she was talking to herself. In a few minutes, she came out carrying a *ciondo*. She grabbed her last born toddler, who was playing in the foyer oblivious to the goings-on, swung the child on her back and left without saying a word. Aboke, likewise, ignored her.

Aboke looped her arm over his shoulders and helped him across the yard. Laying him on a mat on the veranda, she gently touched his ankle to ascertain the extent of the injury. The ankle had started to swell. “Let me boil some water while you rest,” she said. “I’m sure there is no fracture to the bone.”

She brought the water, dissolved some salt and a few medicinal herbs in it. She soaked a piece of cloth in the brew then used it to rub his skin, while exerting a little pressure on the injury. He howled and screamed, protesting her method and even attempting to remove her hand. But she kept on, rubbing and squeezing until the water

became lukewarm. Then, she went into the house and brought out a tin of *Vaseline* jelly. Using the tip of her right index finger, she scooped out a blob of jelly then smeared it over the injury. She then rubbed it gently with her warm hands, massaging his entire foot with the soothing oil. When satisfied, she poured out the water and took the basin, together with the *Vaseline*, back to the house. She returned with a *Leso* which she tied round her waist before sitting down next to him.

“When that leg gets better, you must go to Nairobi and look for your daughter,” she told him. She narrated to him all what she heard at the river. Adding to Siprina’s version, it seemed obvious that something was afoot and nobody was telling them. Even when she had to go and make dinner of sweet potatoes and sour milk, the conversation between them still went on.

“I don’t like people talking about my daughter like that,” he said in a raised voice so that she could hear him. “When I was sending her to school, my own brother, can you imagine my own brother talked ill of me. Do you know what Onyim said? Do you know what he said?” he persisted.

“Yes, I do.”

“He said that sending women to school was a waste of time. According to him, a woman’s place is in the kitchen, keeping home and rearing children. Do you remember that, *Min Tim*?”

“Yes, I remember. And, when that girl got a job, she gave Onyim two expensive suits that otherwise he would not have worn in his entire life.”

“And his son, Nyawade, always spends time in my daughter’s house in Nairobi as if he paid any cent for the girl’s school fees? Now, they have started another rumour about my girl. This time, I will speak my mind!”

“I am not worried about the rumour. They can say all they want. I think what we need to do is contact Sembe to find out whether she has a problem with *Ja Loka*?”

“That girl should know that we are here, still alive and available to help her deal with all her difficulties,” he said. “If it were not for this injury, I could go to Nairobi tomorrow morning and find out all these things for myself.”

“Now that your leg is hurt, I was thinking that I should try to make a telephone call from Birgita’s place in Girango tomorrow. Then, we can decide what to do.”

From the kitchen window, Aboke watched the sunset consume the light of day, replacing it with the placid allure of red and orange, beautifully cast on the horizon beyond the distant Kiri Hills. The magnificent display of the supernatural beauty could have inflicted her soul with unbridled quiescence if the times were different and her worries were elsewhere. Instead, the splendour of the evening was pricking her conscience with anecdotes of her previous shortcomings, including the thoughts of ill will she ever had about Siprina. Despite all these temptations and her weakness in prayer, Aboke trusted that God would protect her daughter. It is the same Almighty who opened her daughter’s womb and gave her children when she almost became the laughing stock of the village. These same thoughts were still on her mind when she set dinner on the mat near her husband. They ate while reviewing the events in their children’s lives. Later, she helped him into the house and then folded the mat and took it inside. She came back to lock the kitchen.

That night, Aboke thought of her daughter and son-in-law. The first time she set eyes on that man, she had gone to Nairobi for an eye operation. Although the same treatment could be obtained in Kisumu, Okola, her eldest son, had insisted that she goes to the city. Numerous, Okola had sent money for the treatment but other financial woes impinged on it, forcing her to postpone the same. Yet, the symptoms worsened until she could hardly read. But, she had other reasons for making the trip. Although Sembe was still at college, there were many rumours that were peddled by those from Nairobi about her seeing a man from Kodegi. Some had intimated that their marriage was imminent. Gladys, her son’s wife, had confirmed that Sembe had a friend, but was reserved about the future of their relationship. This is why she needed to talk to Sembe and, maybe, advise her on how to handle the marriage issue, should that be her plan. Apart from Sembe, she wanted to talk to Okola about his drinking. Gladys had complained to her that Okola was a drunk who never came home until late at night. Given the insecurity in Nairobi, she intended to ask him to change his perilous habit. Then, there was the pending issue of Tim’s college fees and money for herself.

She arrived in Nairobi on a Saturday morning. Okola, his son, Moi, and Sembe came to pick her up at the bus station. She could remember the joy on Sembe's face. Over the years, their relationship metamorphosed into a mature coalition of equals. On occasions when they met, which had become rare since she went to the university, they would chat on just about everything, giggle and laugh as though they were sisters. That day was no exception. When Sembe finally mentioned him, her face beamed with unbridled joy. But, she told her mother nothing more than the fact that they were friends. At first, Aboke thought Gladys and others were making a mountain out of an anthill. But, as it turned out, she saw more of the young man than she had anticipated. That Sunday, he came to be introduced to her. He seemed pleasant and respectable, but she had doubts—doubts that never faded even after he took her to the eye clinic the following Monday and bought her glasses. It was after he brought the bride price and proclaimed their marital union that he vindicated himself before her eyes. Since then, she had visited them in Nairobi many times. She remembered the difficult days of their marriage when they struggled to have a child and the joy that followed when they did. She made it a habit to celebrate the birth of all her grandchildren in Nairobi. On such occasions, she would visit them, bringing sweet potatoes, ground cassava and smoked fish.

Paulus had hardly slept. The pain in his ankle was making him feverish. He waited too long for morning to come but when some prick of light began to show through the cracks in the window, he felt weak, warm and drowsy. As he rolled lazily to one side, stretching out his arms with the intention of positioning his leg comfortably to allow him catch some sleep, he felt something. His wife was still asleep. He roused himself and tapped her on the shoulder. "*Min* Tim, get up. Is it not time? Get up if you don't want to be late."

She turned over and grunted. "What time is it?"

"It is already morning. Didn't you say you wanted to get Birgita before she goes to the market?"

Aboke huddled under the blanket and lay still. She gazed at the ceiling feeling rather betrayed by the onset of dawn. A cock crowed from inside the kitchen and another answered from the neighbouring home. She couldn't get out of bed immediately because she felt

heavy with glimpses of thoughts and dreams of the previous night. As she waited for some jolt to eject her from the bed, her eyes gradually grew accustomed to the darkness. She could make out the brown wardrobe with their clothes draped over it. On the wall opposite the bed, was the picture of Paulus and her during their youthful days in Uganda. Not far away to her right, was a rickety wooden stool upon which two old suitcases were placed.

"Oh," she said, slipping out of bed reluctantly. She leaned over the windowsill, looked at the pale tinted clouds and at the dark banana bushes crowding the near side of the animal pen. The sky had lightened considerably by this time.

"How is your leg?" she asked, throwing a *Leso* round her waist.

"I didn't sleep at all. perhaps, I should send for Oliech Jabilo to come and look at it."

"I was thinking that I should postpone my journey until tomorrow so that I can take care of that leg of yours."

"Well, I am sure my leg can wait until you come back."

"No, I don't think so. It's not prudent that I leave when you are so sick. Who will cook for you? If Siprina were here..."

"Don't even mention that woman. She is no longer welcome in this home."

"I will not go today, Paulus."

He knew better than to insist. She was a resolute woman, never quite easily convinced to change her mind on a matter of such gravity. "All right, maybe, we can find somebody to send."

She left him on the bed and went to the kitchen. Using the key, she opened the lock and let out the chicken. She went to the next room, untied the goats and put leashes on them. She led them out of the kitchen, letting their young scamper excitedly around the compound. She tied them to the little shrubs and trees, carefully, lest they become entangled. When finished, she stretched languorously to regain her composure, only to see two young boys coming towards her. They were Odhoch Awino's grandchildren. They brought two letters that they passed to her. The letters were given to them by the school teacher the day before, but they couldn't bring them because it was late. As the children ran towards the school, she took the letters to the house.

One letter was from Sembe and the other from Baby in Texas. Baby described to them how her journey to the United States had been and informed them that she was now settled in school. She promised that she would soon call Sembe on the telephone. It was a happy letter, more so because she had sent them one hundred dollars through Western Union. Sembe's letter was sad. She was informing them that, as of that moment, she had moved out of her house in Kileleshwa, driven out by her husband, and was renting a house in Mamboleo Estate. She was hoping that Amu would give her the children because she was missing them very much. As far as she was concerned, the marriage was over because she couldn't tolerate the beatings. She described in detail the entire story of their fight and how she lost the baby. The rest were just ramblings about how evil her husband was. At the end, she expressed sorrow that she had let them down.

They were dismayed more than they were surprised.

"That man has turned into a beast. I know Sembe. She cannot tolerate anybody who touches her. I told that man that his wife was never, not even once, beaten by her father. So, if he tried beating her, they would not cope," Aboke lamented.

"That wasn't beating. That was killing."

"She even lost the baby. What was he thinking?"

"Something is wrong. I know something is wrong."

"I don't care whether something is wrong or not, I need to go to Nairobi to talk to my child. I must go to Nairobi."

"You can use part of the money Baby sent but the rest I will use to repair the kitchen."

"I want to go to Nairobi immediately! I know that child is suffering now. She needs to talk to someone."

Chapter Ten

VALERINA ARRIVED IN Nairobi two weeks after they received Auntie Didi's letter and about two months after Amu and Sembe separated. Amu picked her up at the bus station in the evening and took her to Rose Gardens. Auntie Didi was expecting her. Amu left immediately despite Auntie Didi's insistence that he stay for tea. His excuse was the children but, in reality, it was the awkward feeling of guilt and mistrust that in his paranoia seemed so entwined with his mother's presence. He had been tense throughout the evening, his mind constantly imbibing those unhappy memories of Sembe's last days in Kileleshwa. Realising that assaulting his wife and his involvement with Beth had deprecated any favour he could find with the womenfolk, he preferred to stay away from them unless it was unavoidable. In their eyes, he was to blame for all his marital problems, and there wasn't a thing he could do to change this predisposition. And, although none of them mentioned anything to do with Sembe or his marriage that day, he was well aware that he would be treading on less than limpid ground should any such discussion erupt.

Driving back to Kileleshwa, Amu thought about the future of his marriage against the unwieldy powers of the *Luo* society. Although he had settled on the belief that Sembe was no longer central to his life, the idea of divorce would be most unpalatable to his folks. He could choose to ignore his parents, true, but where would this leave him? Could he ignore his relatives, his clan and the community as a whole? He was gripped by apprehension when he realized that a *Luo* marriage was something difficult to sever completely. He vividly remembered the late Councillor Joakim Midigo, a prominent local politician from his village, who died in a motorcycle accident. Before he could be buried, the elders looked for his first wife whom he had divorced many years before and brought her home. They even built a house for her. Furthermore, they forced the second wife to share

the wealth of the estate with a co-wife she had never met or seen before. All these made him tense and he wondered whether his mother and Auntie Didi had the same plan.

When he showed up at Rose Gardens the next day, the women were ready for him. Animated into action by his insistence that he did not know the whereabouts of his wife, Auntie Didi and his mother rained blame on him as though they had planned it. They castigated his philandering, his aggressiveness and his cavalier attitude towards the marriage, putting all the blame squarely at his feet. His mother was more poignant in her admonition. "Your unseemly behaviour has brought shame and disgrace to our family," she declared. Auntie Didi took the cue from his mother and questioned his sense of responsibility and pride. In her view, a man worth his salt would not violate his wife in the manner that he had done. He had been accused, tried and convicted.

It was a bad coincidence for him, especially in view of his relationship with Auntie Didi. He respected her so much that he could never go against anything she said. This was something that began way back when he was still at the Kenya polytechnic and living in this very house. After he graduated, he left Rose Gardens to live with Nyabari in Ndola. Rose Gardens was like a prison. Although he had a whole room to himself, there was no privacy. The maid had strict instructions to clean and inspect it thoroughly every day. He couldn't go to a movie in town or visit friends without tacit approval from his aunt. Also, nobody could visit him unless the parents or relatives were known, lest they be undesirable characters from the nearby Wangwe slums. The Sabbath on every Saturday was a must event. Beer drinking or smoking were totally out of the question. He loathed the life in Rose Gardens and was happy to migrate to Ndola where he slept on the sofa and ate *Sukuma Wiki* and Ugali seven days a week, but, without having to suffer anybody's scrutiny. Though Auntie Didi wasn't particularly thrilled about his decision to move, she never spoke of it openly. She must have regarded his action as a mere recusancy of an adolescent mind.

Despite living apart, their relationship never changed. She never treated him any differently and he never stopped visiting Rose Gardens. Whenever he had a problem, he would go to her and somehow, she would find a solution. Amu would never forget that

it was she who got him a job at EAP. One morning, she had come to Ndola in a monstrous Mitsubishi Pajero to fetch him. She drove directly to EAP. A short private discussion with the managing director while he waited in the reception had done it. When they called him into the office, the managing director informed him that he had been hired as the new production manager. After that, Auntie Didi helped him to raise the deposit for his Kileleshwa house and brought to him the university lecturer who provided his duty-free facility that enabled him to purchase the Volvo. Also, she sponsored Baby, his sister-in-law, for her visa application at the U.S. Embassy and she also secured the cheapest ticket for her travel. All his children went to good schools because of Auntie Didi's connections. On all counts, she was like a queen mother to him, always available to help whenever he had problems.

Thus, he knew better than to answer back when Auntie Didi was talking. According to the women, divorce was totally out of the question. He had to bring his wife back. The finality with which the verdict was pronounced made nonsense of his earlier belief that they were his relatives thus duty bound to support his point of view. He had thought of defending himself by showing them that she was the aggressor and he was merely defending himself. He had wanted to show them the scar on his chest where her knife of aggression had slashed. But he suppressed his thoughts, choosing instead to allow them to vent as much anger as they possibly could. It was the only way to narrow their onslaught. Moreover, he wasn't prepared to contest the fact that he was culpable, at least to some degree, of inflicting some harm on his wife, even if the provocation were to be considered.

When they finished, he asked them what he could do if Sembe did not want to return.

"What do you mean she doesn't want to come back? You tossed her out you go get her back," Auntie Didi retorted.

"That's right, you have to get her back," his mother confirmed. "However, this is where I come in. Somebody has to talk to her about your stupidity and assure her that you will not repeat the same mistake again. Tomorrow, you have to tell that boy of Odindo, what is his name? Yes, Kizito, to come and see me. I will send him to bring *Nyar Komogi* here."

During that week, Valerina conducted an intense reconciliation bid; talking to everyone involved; summoning others to her Rose Gardens headquarters and, on occasion, communicating her message through the telephone or trusted messengers. She recruited Kizito, his wife, Susana, Auntie Didi, Gladys and Nyabari as her diplomats extraordinaire. When she managed to get hold of Sembe, she convinced her to come to Rose Gardens on a Saturday so that they could talk. Amu did not know this until that Saturday when his mother called him at his office. He had gone to the office that afternoon for no particular reason other than to take his mind off his problems. She asked him to come to Rose Gardens immediately. She sounded erratic on the phone and a little agitated. It was as though something serious had happened. He hurriedly left the office then drove to Rose Gardens, arriving there at about two-thirty. He parked in the street and walked through an open gate into the vast compound. Beside his aunt's white Mitsubishi Pajero, two other cars were parked on the brick-paved driveway. He recognised the red Suzuki that belonged to Ayugi, but not the white Peugeot 504. With some trepidation, he walked through the kitchen door to the living room where Kizito and Ayugi were watching some gospel programme on the television. There was no sign of his wife or his mother. The atmosphere in the room was calm and relaxed unlike the oppressive melancholy that pervaded it during his last visit. In a short while, his mother, Sembe, Susana and Auntie Didi walked in from the inner room. Sembe's face was gloomy, an obvious sign that she had been crying. Auntie Didi spoke first. "I can see that you are here, Amu. Perhaps this is a good time to talk."

Kizito and Ayugi excused themselves. Without revealing the nature of their discussion with Sembe, Valerina began by expressing her profound regret at what had happened. She talked at length of her continued prayers and hope that the devil would be kept at bay. She went on and on, blaming Amu and praising Sembe for being so understanding. Lastly, she issued a warning. "If he ever tries to beat you again, at all, or even just push you, leave him at once and come to me. You will see how I deal with him," she said to Sembe whose eyes were wet with tears. "At this age, his father has never touched me. I don't know where he got that stupid behaviour. And you," she said, turning to Amu. "If you beat *Nyar Komogi* again you will

have to find another home and that is the message from your father. As for that prostitute of yours, I am dismayed Amu, I am dismayed indeed. In fact, you have shamed us, your father and me, a great deal. You have also shamed yourself. Well, it is good that she has left town. I don't want to hear of her at all. Leave that woman alone. See how she has almost wrecked your family? Leave that woman completely. Do you hear me, Amu?"

He nodded while wiping the tiny rivulets of sweat from his forehead.

Amu had to take another lecture from Auntie Didi before Sembe was given a chance to say something. She narrated again, amid sobs, how he almost killed her over that woman, Beth. He was sure that by now they had heard the story a million times. Auntie Didi consoled her and shook her head in agreement. When he was finally given a chance to talk, he did the expected. He said he was sorry for all that he had done and asked for forgiveness. His attempts to say more were halted by Sembe's instant blast. "That is what he always says. 'I am sorry, I am sorry'. But he never changes. Last time, when I saw him kissing that woman in public with my own two eyes, he said he was sorry and then he still went to see her again."

Auntie Didi cut her short. "This time, it will be different," she said candidly. "Now that the woman is safely packaged in Kisumu, we will ensure that she stays there. Oh, yes she will."

Auntie Didi spoke with so much confidence it was hard to avoid linking her to Beth's decision to move to Kisumu. Beth couldn't have decided to go to Kisumu as abruptly as she did. This must have been a scheme—a plan that Auntie Didi contrived to get her out of his reach. He wondered what she was told or given or perhaps both. An ambitious woman like Beth might have sought both cash and a good reference for a job, although money seemed more probable considering her splurging lifestyle just before she left. But who could blame her? In a country where corruption was so rampant, it would not be unusual for a woman of insidious character to sell her love for some thousands of shillings and then take off.

"Auntie Didi is here, you know that. If you have any problems with him, just come and talk to her and she will straighten him out," Valerina added.

Nobody seemed interested in Amu. It was all about Sembe and how much she had suffered. The women's approach seemed predicated on a premise that Sembe alone had the power to unlock their estrangement. Thus, they offered ample comfort to her while completely ignoring him. His desire to hold Sembe to account for her part in the fight had been kept in check by his mother's condescending assumptions and Auntie Didi's know-it-all attitude. When it was finally over, he went to the living room while his mother walked Sembe, her friend, Ayugi, and Gladys to their car. Now, they were talking and even laughing!

Amu was still slumped in his chair, contemplating his next move, when his mother called him. Outside, Ayugi was already in her car while Kizito and his wife, Susana, were in the white Peugeot 504. His mother wanted to talk with him and Sembe alone. "I hope that we can put this matter behind us as soon as possible," she stated. "I have something that I want to tell you. You see, we are *Luos*. When something like this happens between a husband and wife, certain rites have to be performed to calm tempers and appease the wrongs that might have been committed. As a parent, it is my duty to ensure that you two take a *Manyasi*. This must be done in your house since it is in that house that blood was spilled. When everything is settled, I will arrange for prayers and *Manyasi*. This should be no later than next month. *Nyar Komogi*, talk to your parents about it and if they confirm to you that *Manyasi* should be taken in this case then let me know. It will have no effect if either of you doesn't take it. So, I hope to hear from you when you're ready. And, Amu, I want to see my grandchildren before I go back to Kodegi."

His mother bid her goodbye and left them standing next to each other. Lacking anything constructive to say, Amu asked how she was doing and she said that she was fine. She seemed more relaxed than before. All the tears and anger had subsided.

"I understand you stay in Mamboleo?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered anxiously.

"Where exactly is your house?"

She explained, with exaggerated alacrity, the location of her flat. She even went back to the Peugeot, took out pen and paper and drew him a map of the place. She seemed eager to have him know the place and, perhaps, visit.

“May I visit, say, tomorrow?” he asked, subconsciously playing to her wishes.

“Not tomorrow. I will not be around. How about next Saturday?” she inquired.

“That is perfect.”

“Somebody told me that your home telephone is not working. Is it true?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered. The truth was that he had changed it to limit her access to the children. “But we repaired it. We now have a new, phone number,” he said and proceeded to give it to her.

Amu wasn’t particularly thrilled about the events of that afternoon. Although he felt a little happy that he had seen Sembe and that the woman still had feelings for him, he wasn’t sure that the reconciliation brokered by his mother was fair to him. At least Sembe should have admitted her part in the events of that frightful night. Insofar as he could remember, it was she who started it all, and it was she who the first to hit him. Worse still, Sembe had never told him that she was pregnant. Should he have known that, he wouldn’t have laid a finger on her. Also, he never tossed Sembe out as everybody was now saying. He gave the woman a choice to be a wife or a former wife, and she chose the latter. Asking your wife to move into the matrimonial bedroom is a perfectly normal thing to do. After all, what else could he have done? How about the knife? Had he not stepped back he could be history. As he drove into his compound, he thought it preposterous and blatantly presumptuous that the women should make him apologise as though he was the villain, when his part in the whole imbroglio was so minor. There was no way he was going to put up with such an unfair judgment any longer than he had done already. He decided that Sembe wasn’t going to set foot in his house until she acknowledged that she, too, had a responsibility in the events that were threatening their marriage.

After Sembe parked the car in the enclosed patio, she ran upstairs and knocked on Toni’s door. He wasn’t in. She stood there for a while debating whether to push the car keys under his door or take

them to her place. Since he wasn't home, she reasoned that he did not need the car. She moved slowly towards her apartment, making sure that he wasn't anywhere in the vicinity. When she got there, she threw her handbag onto the makeshift table that Toni had given her and went straight to the bedroom. She grabbed the phone, which was lying on the floor, and sat on the bed. She was eager to talk to Ayugi because they did not have enough time to digest the events of the afternoon. She dialled the number and when the phone started ringing on the other side, she let her back fall on the bed. She supported her head on the pillow while keeping the receiver to her ear.

"Why did you take so long, girl?" Ayugi shouted from the other end of the line, her voice grating with eagerness.

"I had to drop off Kizito and my sister-in-law. By the way, *Dani* is very annoyed with her son and so is Auntie Didi. Do you know what she did?"

"Who?"

"Auntie Didi," Sembe replied hastily.

"No."

"Well, she shipped that bitch called Beth out of town and asked her not to come back. I didn't know that they were serious."

"How?"

"I don't know the details but Auntie Didi seems to have engineered that plan. From what they told me, that bitch is not to set foot in Nairobi again. I sympathise with her lover!"

"I hear that Didi is a very powerful woman. She could do something like that, I have no doubt."

"I am sure she is very much involved but she is not divulging any details."

"So, where does that leave you?"

"I don't know. But, you see, it's not difficult to appreciate their concern for our relationship. Frankly, I do. But you know that Amu is the one who created all this mess?"

"Yeah. So, what are you going to do about Amu?"

"I don't know yet. What do you think?"

"Has he apologised to you and begged you to return home?"

"He apologised in front of everybody. You should have seen him, girl. He was heartbroken. The boy was almost crying ... man! I have never seen him like that."

"Maybe, he has learned his lesson this time."

"I think so but let's wait and see. Imagine, he had the audacity to ask me whether he could visit me here in Mamboleo. He wanted to come tomorrow, but I refused."

"What do you mean—refused?"

"I told him I would be busy."

"What exactly would keep you busy? Is it that man, Toni?"

"He must labour to get me back. Just like old times. Never mind about Toni, he is too young for me. My kind is just best for men like Amu Ndeda."

"So, ultimately, did you tell him when you would... not be busy?"

"Yeah. Next Saturday to be exact."

"Wow! I don't know, girl. I don't know anything about Amu anymore, hurting you like that. I sure don't know. He must apologise real good about the beating," Ayugi lamented.

Sembe did not like the censure in her voice. "Don't tell me you don't like us getting together again?" she questioned.

"No, I'm not saying that," Ayugi replied quickly. "It's only that I don't like men who abuse their wives."

"Amu had never touched me in the time we were married. It was only this once and you know what? I think both of us went too far. He was to blame just as much as I was—you remember the saying, 'it takes two to tango'?"

"Well, it looks as though things are brightening up on your side. You know the next *Bura* is supposed to be in Kileleshwa. I hope things will settle down before then."

"I will know after next Saturday when I talk to my *Mzee*."

"I am so happy for you, girl. I just want the problems to be behind us. Please take care of yourself and if you notice anything at all, don't hesitate to pack your bags. Remember, you are useful to me as a friend if you are alive and not dead."

When she finished talking to Ayugi, she stretched out on the bed, allowing her body to bathe in the warmth of her new-found happiness. The events of the day and the conversation with Ayugi had revived the thought of intimacy that, for a time, had been consigned to a temporary state of torpor. She was surprised to find herself thinking of Amu again, not in a distant and abhorrent sense, but as the passionate lover he used to be. Subconsciously, she let

herself be persuaded about the adoring and sensual love that Amu had for her. She tried to imagine how he would try to seduce her the coming weekend. He would probably come dressed in those corduroy trousers and the Polo T-shirt that she liked so much or perhaps that Nigerian *Agbada* that he bought when on a trip to West Africa last year. He liked wearing it on weekends. Whatever attire he would be in, she would be waiting. And when he arrives, she will play a little upset for a while so that he apologises and confesses his love for her. “Sem, I love you so much,” he might say. She would then warm to his advances, slowly, until they make love. Oh, yes, she might not refuse if he asks—in a pleasant way. But Amu was no novice in these matters; he surely knew how to navigate his boat in the roughest of seas.

She was still lost in thought when Toni knocked on her door. She rose to open the door with a smile on her face.

“Thanks, Toni,” she told him, handing the car keys to him.

“The pleasure is all mine. How did it go?”

Ever since they became acquainted, they shared some of their intimate stories. She had told him exactly where she was going. “Quite well, I might say. My mother-in-law has sided with me and my poor husband is alone. Do you know what that means?”

“Yeah. If it were me, it would mean outright begging. I mean begging for my life, especially if the woman in question is as beautiful as the one before me right now.”

“Hmmm, I don’t know about begging but I imagine some apology may be in order.”

“So, did he apologise?”

“Oh yes, he did.”

“That is beautiful, Sembe. I am so happy for you, really. You two should get back together. Just imagine what that will mean to the girls.”

“I certainly hope so. He is coming next weekend to smooth things out.”

“Wonderful. Then, maybe I will have a chance to see this lucky guy.”

“Maybe. If he won’t be too busy.”

“I can imagine,” he said, obviously amused by her candidness.

The week did not move as fast as Sembe had wanted. Monday seemed to take ages to get to nightfall and so did Tuesday and the rest of the days. However, it gave her time to prepare for his visit. When Saturday came, she had gone through every word and every deed with which she would grace his presence. Hopefully, this was to be her last day in Mamboleo. She was ready—ready to go back to her home, her children and her soul mate. In her mind, she had forgiven him completely and, in addition, was ready to apologise for having taken the unusual step of moving out of the matrimonial home. That morning, she did her hair with more care than usual. Choosing a dress for the day was an extremely arduous undertaking. She couldn't remember whether he liked the red chiffon or the exquisite *Kitenge* that he had preferred for their company events. She settled on the tight fitting chiffon, choosing to look sensual and bright.

That afternoon, she was unsettled, one minute reading a book and the other lying on the bed, wishing that time could move faster. Even the slightest of sound brought her scampering to the window to see whether he had arrived. Finding it to be something innocuous, she laughed at her own impetuosity. "I will not live like this," she chuckled and went to take a shower. As seconds turned into minutes and minutes turned into hours, nothing happened. By early evening, she was beginning to despair. Suddenly, a car pulled up to the gate. She heard some people talking. In her mind it was Amu asking for directions to the apartment. Her heart began to beat rapidly as she ran back to the bathroom to straighten her dress and redo her hair. At any moment, he would knock the door. She waited for about ten minutes and nothing happened. Then, she heard those people talking again and could discern their voices. It was Toni and the landlord. Her excited palpitations subsided as she retreated to her bedroom to lie down. The day had been long and she was tired.

Sembe had hoped that there was some kind of mistake and that Amu would call her on Monday to explain. But he never did. After about a week, she called him and Sally said that he was in a meeting. Later, when she got him, he was obstreperous, arrogant and very condescending—they ended up quarrelling over nothing of significance. She made subsequent efforts to get hold of him through Auntie Didi but he never yielded. She went to the house in Kileleshwa but he would not talk to her. She took two weeks' leave

and went to his home in Kodegi to stay with his parents. She bought lots of presents for the old folks and food to last her two weeks. She even secured a Shirikisho Co-operative loan and repaired a part of their house in Kodegi. These, she thought, would demonstrate to Amu how much she treasured their marriage. Amu was unmoved. When her individual efforts failed, she enlisted the help of friends. Ayugi tried, so did her friend Ogutu, but he only gave false promises that he never honoured. She did all that she could think of, including sending a letter asking him whether she could make arrangements to bring his son to Nairobi to stay with her for a while, just to show her acceptance of the kid. The letter solicited no response.

Sembe was miserable. She became sickly and very temperamental. Her manner of dressing evinced a growing disenchantment with life. She lost interest in many things, including the car and telephone. When she did not pay the bill, the phone was disconnected. The car sat in the compound with a flat front wheel. She wasn't bothered. Her routine was simple. She would go to work in the morning, come home in the evening and sleep until the next day. As the days progressed, her condition worsened. She started to miss work and slept all day.

It was Toni who came to her rescue. Every evening, he would show up at her flat with a bowl of soup and a few slices of warm bread. Later, they would go to his apartment, watch movies and talk. He convinced her that there was no point in ruining her life for such a worthless character of a man. He encouraged her to be forward-looking because, at some point, she might find a man who would love and care for her more than she could ever imagine. Most of all, she needed to be around for her children. Their joint hatred for Amu became the subject of extended discussions that would sometimes occupy them until midnight. Toni took it upon himself the duty of taking her to work in the morning and picking her up in the evening. He repaired the car and encouraged her to pay the phone bill. Within weeks, she was on her feet again.

As her health improved, Sembe began to miss her children more than she missed their father. The talks with Toni became more and more directed towards the possibility of getting custody of her children. Toni advised her to acquire a bigger house so she applied for a government house. Concurrently, and with help from Toni, she began to buy household items. She bought kitchen utensils,

two extra beds and mattresses. She also had a Sofa made for her by some *Jua Kali* carpenters at Ngara Market. By the end of the year, her apartment was well-furnished. In February, a government house became available for her in the Upper Hill area. It was a large four bedroom house in a big compound. Although it needed a lot of repair, its condition was good enough for immediate occupation. Toni helped her to move her possessions and to have the electricity, telephone and water connected.

Toni became such a dear friend after Sembe moved to Upper Hill. She couldn't think of any man who would be gracious enough to assist a woman to the extent that he had done without taking advantage of her. Still, she wasn't sure about the direction of their friendship. It wasn't that she did not like him nor was it any uncertainty about his ability to commit to a long lasting relationship. Not at all. As a matter of fact, she enjoyed his company a great deal. He was handsome, had a good sense of humour and a reasonably good job. It was just that she thought it a little too early for her to get involved with another man. Moreover, she had known him for only a couple of months. If it were the college days, this could be the time to size him up, discuss his qualities with friends and lament his failure to meet the threshold—in their youthful world, no man ever met the threshold. But, marriage had taken away all that excitement. She couldn't even remember how it felt to be seduced; to have a man goad over her, exploring her feelings while appreciating her beauty and personality. As good as Tony was, she had not fallen in love with him and she doubted if she ever would. Perhaps, it was denial, that at her age, she couldn't have some excitement in her life. Perhaps, she had been a wife too long. She simply had not accepted the fact that another man could replace Amu and that was something that she couldn't fathom. Amu had spoiled her completely; made her feel that there was no other way to live except with him. Undoubtedly, he couldn't have done this alone. She was an accessory to the fact. If that was the case, why did the marriage have such a profound effect on her and not him? This was something she had not figured out in the many days that she went out with Toni. No wonder she felt rather uncomfortable when Toni inquired whether she had thought of filing for divorce.

"I don't know, Toni. I don't know whether it is the right thing to do," she said truthfully.

“Why? Do you think your husband might still come back?”

“I know he doesn’t want me and Hell, yeah, I have also had enough of him. It’s all because of my children. To them, Daddy will always be Daddy, no matter what happens.”

“How about Mummy? She will always be Mummy, remember?”

“Yes ... but I don’t know, Toni... You should see it in their eyes. They love their Daddy.”

“I am sure they do. I am worried about you, though. Sembe, you must let go. This is not the time to mourn the past. You must come to grips with your feelings. I know it is not easy but you should try. The inner turmoil that you are experiencing is a result of the many years of marriage. You are not alone, Sembe. There are many people who love you and will support you, no matter what.”

“But, Toni, during the marriage, I was somebody, at least Mrs Ndeda. Now, what am I? A nobody. Not even my relatives respect me anymore,” she said, a humble foreboding creeping over her.

“This is why I say that you must come to terms with your own feelings. Moving out of a matrimonial home on its own does not end a marital relationship, especially where children are involved. I realised this when I came from Canada. In my case, it was a long-distance separation yet I still felt tied to my family. I don’t want you to go through what I went through. The sooner you let go, the better.”

“I have to admit that the past months since we broke up have not been exactly wonderful but the pain of leaving everything behind has been exceedingly nagging. It makes me feel that perhaps we didn’t try hard enough. Maybe we have now learned our lesson and should try again. Perhaps, he too, has felt the pain—enough to jolt some sense into him so that he will treat me better this time. Toni, what is a woman supposed to do to make a marriage work?”

“You are asking the wrong question, Sembe. The right question should be, how do I make the best of my situation? What should I learn from the experience to make me happier and stronger? Divorce or separation should be more than just a time to pick up the pieces. It should offer an opportunity for you to come to terms with your past, improve on your life and, most importantly, be yourself. Allow me to say that I see in you a woman of great promise, intelligence and beauty. You are a person destined for greater things. Don’t let him weigh you down.”

“Really?”

“I believe in you, my dear. I ask one thing and one thing only. Stop worrying about nothing.”

“Thanks, Toni, for having faith in me.”

“Sembe, I think you should take steps to get your children and file for an official divorce so that you can know where you stand.”

“How do I do that?”

“I don’t know how it is done but I will talk to some friends and find out for you.”

It wasn’t Toni who guided her through her first encounter with a divorce lawyer, but Ayugi and her husband John. This was after she had a similar conversation with Ayugi the next day. Ayugi too, was convinced that the best thing for her was to end the marriage officially so that she could be free to continue with her life. In her manner of talking, divorce seemed like the magical elixir for all her worldly woes, including custody of her daughters. The trio had made it look as though it was the only way in which she could get her children. This sublimed her desire to seek more information about the legal process, but with the particular intention to discern why it couldn’t be possible to gain custody of her children without necessarily going through divorce. When she finally agreed to take a trip to the lawyer’s office, it wasn’t for the reason that she had made up her mind to divorce Amu, but to enlighten herself, before taking a decisive step, of the intricacy of the law. She hoped, against all odds, to find that a possibility existed of wresting her children from Amu without invalidating their marital union.

That Friday, Ayugi and John took Sembe to a lawyer’s office on the fifth floor of Ford House on Kenyatta Avenue. It was a modest establishment, occupying only three or four rooms. The reception was set in a middle room, connected to offices on either side by stylish wooden doors. There, two women were sitting behind desks that faced each other, each with a pile of files placed beside their new typewriters. After a brief sojourn in the reception area, they were ushered into the inner office. The lawyer, Wanja Peters, received them gleefully and invited them to sit on three tapestry-covered visitors’ chairs in front of her polished mahogany desk. “John, you have never been to my office. Welcome,” she said with a wide smile. As they sat, Sembe’s gaze wandered to the wall directly

opposite where two framed degree certificates and a number of beautiful water paintings hung in a well spaced order. She also noticed the colourful Persian rug on the floor. The air in the room was cool and refreshing. From the wide window behind the lawyer's desk, Sembe could catch a glimpse of the radio antennae on top of Star Duck House, the long queue of traffic on Kenyatta Avenue and the bright sunlight of the outdoors.

Sembe heard John introduce her and she managed a small grin. Wanjia stood up from her chair and stretched out her hand for a firm handshake. "Welcome," Wanjia said to her.

"Thank you," she said, her eyes fixed on the host.

Wanja Peters was a woman of almost Sembe's age. She was tall and wantonly beautiful. She wore an elegant dark blue trouser suit with thin white stripes, which fitted her body perfectly. Her hair was beautifully braided to the back. She had a shapely mouth and a sensitive face with wide eyes that had a peculiar and searching intensity. By her decorum, one could discern that she was blessed with an intellectual pedigree and an affluent upbringing. She combined the resplendence of a model with the perspicuity of an insightful and serious legal professional. Sembe could tell that she was going to like her.

After Ayugi and her husband left, Sembe narrated to the lawyer the story of her life, omitting only the soggy details of their sexual encounters. Wanjia listened carefully, taking brief notes occasionally whenever a point was made that she thought might be useful. In the end, Sembe stated what, in her opinion, was the purpose of seeking legal counsel. "What I need, now, is the custody of my children. This is more important to me than divorce."

"I am, indeed, sorry to hear what you have been through, Mrs Ndeda. May I ask whether there has been any attempt at reconciliation other than that meeting at Rose Gardens?"

"No, none. I know my parents have been asking when his people would go to our home but as you know, everything depends on us two."

"Oh, I see. What I can tell you, Mrs Ndeda, is that your husband had no right to treat you in that way. The good thing is that you have the power to stop him and such power is granted by the law. For a long time, women have been held ransom by pawky husbands,

abused and deprived simply because they don't know the law. Even the few who do, still believe that matrimonial law and the courts are inappropriate agents for effecting marital change. Tell me, Mrs Ndeda, where are you in this equation? Do you believe that matrimony is beyond the law?"

"I don't know, Miss Peters..."

"Call me Wanja, please."

"I don't know, Wanja. It just seems a bit confusing to me right now."

"Well, it is my duty to explain everything that you need to know and guide you in making decisions about your future. Let me tell you. The law gives you the power to claim and enjoy all the benefits that accrue from your marriage. It also gives you the power to stop your husband from denying you what is rightfully yours. This power can be exercised by filing a case in court. When you do so, your husband will get the message. He will know that you are not going to empathize with his idiosyncrasies, nor rescue him from himself anymore; that you are out and the relationship is kaput."

"But, I can still send the message without necessarily divorcing him, can't I?"

"I don't see how, especially if you are tired of the marriage and you would like to make a clean break and move on with your life."

"I want all that but I still think that my priority right now is just the children. Can I get the children without filing for divorce?"

"I don't know what you mean? Listen to me, Mrs Ndeda. I know you still feel some love for him. You wish that he would come home some day. I don't blame you and, frankly, I would be surprised if you didn't think that way. But, I am afraid that it is not going to be so. I have seen many women torment themselves and, finally, they come to me and say, 'Wanja, file that divorce case. I am tired. I want to move on with my life.' For some, it may be too late to gather the pieces; for others it may be just fine. You are an intelligent woman. You surely don't want him to prey on you some day when his girlfriends finally kick him out and he is too tired to woo others."

Sembe kept silent for a while. She wasn't at ease with the divorce but there seemed to be no other way. Finally, she asked, "What does a divorce actually entail?"

"A divorce process begins by filing what is called a petition," Wanja explained. "Well, the petition contains the grounds upon which you seek termination of the marriage and the relief that you seek. Obviously, one relief is the nullification of the marriage, and you can also ask for the custody of the children."

"What are these grounds?"

"In Kenya, divorce is considered a serious affair, which is ludicrous..."

"But it is."

"It shouldn't be. This is what I am saying. When two people cannot live together, it should be easy for them to part ways. Nobody can force a man and woman to live together when the two of them have decided otherwise."

"Is that not what it is? If you want a divorce, you go to court?"

"Yes, but the process is a little cumbersome in the sense that you must show certain things which the court should have no business examining."

"What are these?"

"They are the grounds that you were asking about. The law sets out these grounds and demands of the petitioner to prove them before the court issues a *Decree Nisi*. In law, we call them matrimonial offences. They are: adultery, cruelty, and desertion. In your case, adultery and cruelty may be applicable." The lawyer then went on to explain how the facts of her case may be applied to these grounds and the degree of proof that the court may require. She outlined the process and the likely scenarios that they may encounter, making it seem quite easy and uneventful.

Sembe was still not satisfied. "Must all grounds be proved before the court can grant custody?" she asked.

"Well, if they are alleged in the petition and custody is one of the remedies sought, then they must be proved."

Although still unconvinced that divorce is what she needed, Sembe gave Wanja the go-ahead to prepare the papers. As for custody, Wanja advised her that, at the moment, there was no law forbidding her from taking the children, and she could very well do so, if such an action did not endanger her life or the life of the children. "It is easier for us to fight for the custody when the children are already with you," she said.

Chapter Eleven

THE DIVORCE PAPERS were brought to his office by a scrawny, poorly dressed man in his early thirties. He was unmistakably a *Luo* from Winam, deep in his admiration of the English language but poor in the pronunciation of its words. He wore dark grey trousers that had seen better days, a brown shirt, a cotton tie with the Adita High School logo on it, and a flinching black double-breasted coat. His shoes were dusty and his body smelled of sweat. There was no doubt that the man had walked all the way from the city centre. For all his faults, the man was adept at his work. He introduced himself quickly and skilfully explained his purpose. The reason for his visit was contained in an old supermarket paper bag which he laid on the table before removing its contents one by one. His mission was to deliver court papers, and all he needed in return was Amu's signature on the extra copies. He invited him to peruse the documents and, when ready, sign the copies so that he could be on his way.

No sooner had Amu signed the documents than he motioned the man to leave. He looked at the papers and noticed that they were legal documents signed by a lawyer and the Registrar of the High Court. At the top, was the heading "Petition for Divorce" followed by a long narrative of his sins or alleged sins. Beth's name was mentioned as a co-respondent. What was conspicuous were the allegations of adultery, cruelty and desertion—all these magnified in an opprobrious language that portrayed him as the most irresponsible husband and father the world has ever seen. Beth was portrayed as a rapacious prostitute who had spurned the normalcy of a marriage by maliciously taking away a father from his children, and a husband from his wife with intent to inflict emotional and financial harm. He recognized Sembe's signature on the affidavit that was attached to the petition, which swore to the truthfulness of the allegations. The other document in the bundle was a Summons

issued by the court and directed to him. It gave him fifteen days to respond to the petition, or the matter would proceed to a hearing, "his non-participation notwithstanding".

He flipped through the papers several times. Satisfied that he had read through everything and that there was no hidden trick, he pushed the papers into his drawer then leaned back in his chair to collect his thoughts. Although he was convinced that separation from Sembe was in his best interest, he never thought that it was she who would fire the first salvo. Deep inside, he always believed that she was too weak to confront him in this way, or simply, too much in love to contemplate such a move. Apparently, he was wrong and this made him angry, not with himself, but with her.

The sound of the phone disturbed his equanimity. He hesitated before picking it up.

"Hello, Cos. I was just about to call you. How are you doing?"

"I am doing fine, my friend. What time did you get home last night?"

"Around half past ten. You see, I couldn't stay long because of the children."

"I couldn't come. As you know, my mother-in-law is still around. She is going back by bus tonight and I had to take them shopping all day. In the evening, she had visitors and I wanted to be around. By the way, did Jomo come to The Closet last night?"

"No, why?"

"Because he had some information that I asked him to deliver to you personally."

"What information?"

"Well, since he has not seen you, I might as well tell you. It's about Sembe."

"What about the bitch? I am not interested in her or what she does. I just want to go ahead with my life. You know this, Cos."

"I know that but, as a friend, I felt obliged to let you know that she is dragging your ass to court."

"I know that."

"How did you know?"

"Well, as we are speaking, I have just been given the Court papers."

"Sometimes, The Closet gossips are just as reliable as office memos. By the way, did she bring the papers herself?"

"They were brought by a man from the High Court. But I don't know why she is doing this, Cos. She didn't need to file a suit against me and Beth to get a divorce. I hate courts. What scares me is that one of those papers is a notice requiring that I do something within fifteen days or else I might go to jail. What does a man do in such circumstances?"

"Well, it looks to me as though you have to find a lawyer. Do you have one?"

"No, I don't. I was hoping that you might know one."

"The only one I know is JJ. We were at college together. I think you know him."

"No, I don't."

"He was the guy who wanted Naomi Ogot so much that he lied to her that I had a wife at home. Do you remember? He is a great friend of Fred, Naomi's brother. He was the master of ceremonies at Fred's wedding."

"Oh, that guy. Yes, now I remember. But, that day, he was drunk like crazy. He behaves childishly in my view. I don't think he would give a matter of this nature any serious attention. I need somebody I can trust—somebody who will read these papers and interpret the whole scenario for me without making me feel dumb."

"I also don't think he would be helpful. He specialises in accident cases and insurance claims. He is an ambulance chaser. I am told that ambulance chasers are not good lawyers. Besides, there is a lot of bad blood between us and, since you are my friend, he might not like you. Well, but now that I think about it, you should not have a problem finding one."

"Why is that?"

"Don't you have one in-house? I am talking about the one and only Miss Georgina Wamugunda."

"No, I cannot discuss this matter with her. She might get ideas! Moreover, I don't want the matter to be common knowledge. At least, not now."

"But, she could introduce you to one!"

"Cos, the woman is my boss, remember?"

"Yeah, I know, but she is still a friend, isn't she?"

"Cos, why don't we talk later. I have to run. As you know, I am both a mother and a father. I will call you tomorrow and let you know my plans."

Removing his coat from the hanger, he remembered that during his house purchase, he dealt with some lawyers in town. Since the purchase was financed by his employer, Georgina advised him that it was possible to have one lawyer represent both him and the company. Upon assurance that the lawyer would protect his interests regardless, and considering that it would save him in costs, he decided to go with her advice. She did the spadework so all he had to do was visit the lawyer's office a few times to sign the necessary documents. Now that he remembered, the firm of lawyers had an English name and most of its senior partners were Europeans. But his matter was handled by a Kenyan, a *Luo* in fact who, not even once, spoke to him in *Luo* during the six months that the transaction was under way. His name was Stephen Wellington Maxwell Obuya. The full details of the lawyer, the address and telephone number were in the papers filed with the mortgage documents. He removed his keys from his pocket and strode to the cabinet at the window. He opened it and pulled out the file with his private papers. The latest document in there was a notice indicating that the interest on the mortgage had been increased. He walked back to the velvety sofa, stopping briefly to loosen his tie and then settled comfortably close to the television stand. He was about to start perusing the file when Sally, his secretary, opened the door, slipped in and closed it behind her.

"I came to let you know that I am now leaving for the day," she said.

Sally was a beautiful woman in her mid-twenties. She was married to the famous football player Odis Chenge, and they had one child. Since Sembe left and Beth went to Kisumu, Sally had become very close to him. But their affair was low key, maintained only by the mutual fulfilment of needs. For Amu, it was mainly sex with occasional errands for his children. For her, it was financial, both from her lover personally, as well as from the company. Sally was an astute woman who played her cards well. She never antagonised Sembe during her reign as the Queen of Kileleshwa, or Beth. Amu reciprocated by not demanding more than she could give. He respected her marriage just as much as she respected his. Their relationship was pitched on the tacit understanding that neither of their spouses should be inconvenienced beyond the occasional flirtations that occurred in the office after hours. But even these were conducted in utmost secrecy and at mutually convenient times.

“That’s fine, Sally. Has everyone in the office gone?”

“Yes. I don’t know whether this is a good time but I was wondering whether that issue of my car loan has been discussed,” she asked.

She was standing in the middle of the room. Her immaculate low-cut tight fitting dress accentuated every asset she had in a tasteful and piquant fashion. Slouching in his seat, he placed the file on the table and stood up. He walked to the door and locked it. He moved closer to her and held her waist by both hands. She tried to wriggle out of his grip unobtrusively so as not to offend him but he pulled her even closer. He brought her face close to his and could feel her breathing heavily. She smiled at him and pushed him away. “Not here, Amu...not today.” He obliged, feeling a little embarrassed by the ephemeral display of lust. She walked to the door, unlocked it and slipped out but not before reminding him about the car loan issue.

The next day, Amu set about to find Steven Wellington Maxwell Obuya. A call to the European firm of lawyers revealed that the man had since left and set up shop on his own under the company name of Maxwell Obuya and Company Advocates. From the directory, Sally found the telephone number and called him. He was elated when informed that the call was from EAP. Amu greeted him and was surprised that the man was more than eager to talk to him in *Luo*. Since he was unwilling to discuss the nature of his business on the phone, they agreed to meet in Obuya’s office after work that day.

When Amu appeared in Obuya’s office that afternoon, the lawyer was relaxed and ebullient. He listened keenly as Amu gave a summary of his troubles. He never asked a question or made a comment until Amu finished. The lawyer leaned back in his chair, a look of frustration coming over his face. “Mr Ndeda,” he said in a low tone, “I could have been happy to take your case. Unfortunately, anything involving litigation may be quite out of my range.” He went on to explain that he had no experience in divorce matters, especially those that may require litigation. He confessed to Amu that he never did anything that involved court hearings before. His work was mainly conveyancing, which he explained as the legal work involving the transfers of property and the formation of

companies. "But, I can introduce you to another lawyer whom I know will take care of your matter very well and at a reasonable cost," he said. "He is not an ambulance chasing shyster. He is of great repute, both personally and professionally."

"Right now, that is the kind of person I need," said Amu.

"Well, I can call him now and let you arrange where to meet."

Amu agreed.

After a brief chat on the phone, Obuya informed his friend of the reason for his call. They agreed that it would be best if Amu went to that lawyer's office, and so an appointment was set for nine o'clock the next day. This is how Amu came to be involved with Mr Sarakasi of Waluballa, Mosonik and Sarakasi Advocates.

When Amu left Obuya's office at about six thirty in the evening, he felt happy that at least he was getting somewhere with his search for a lawyer. Although it was only a Thursday, he decided to have one or two beers at The Closet before going home to his children. The bar was patronised by the usual crowd, including Cosmas, Osolo and McOloo. He came in when they were discussing the Kenya Football League. Talk drifted to the major teams, Olocho and Chui, and clearly there were differences in opinion on each side. Each group claimed that its club had a better chance of winning the national league that year. The league was still in its third trimester and Amu wondered why the anticipation of its finals should generate such heated argument. At midnight, Osolo who had been quiet for a while, belched loudly, hiccupped three times, stood up and looked at his friends then asked whether they thought he was drunk. He smiled with great satisfaction when Amu said he did not think so. "There are fellows," said Osolo in a heavy drunken voice, "who will get drunk on two bottles. I throw out a challenge to anyone. Put fifteen bottles of beer into this soul," he said, tapping his chest, "and I will still drive home to my wife and carry out my matrimonial duties with the keenness of a person weeding potato plants." Amu knew differently. The man's car was a wreck. It had dents and bumps all over its frame and the little patches of primer paint made it look like a chameleon making a bravura performance. He couldn't keep his children in school for a consecutive term and his wife had been in and out the matrimonial home like a short-wave radio. All these were on account of his drunkenness. In short, the man survived on the goodwill of his brothers and the benevolence of the Almighty.

Amu left the bar a few minutes later. When he reached home, the lights in the house were still on and the security guard at the gate was anxious to talk to him beyond just answering his greetings. He obliged by asking him what was going on. The guard moved closer and informed him that Sembe had been around, wanting to enter the property. He refused to open the gate and when she threatened to be belligerent, he called his supervisor who asked her to leave. Amu thanked the guard and gave him twenty shillings in appreciation. Inside the house, Odongo was still awake. The story was that Sembe showed up at the gate at around six o'clock and waited for him until seven o'clock. She talked to the children at the gate but was refused entry, according to his instructions. She then wanted the children to accompany her and that was when the security guard called his supervisor and the matter was settled. She was asked to bring a court order or come with the police. He thanked Odongo and asked him to go to bed. "That woman has started a war and a war she will have," he said as he retired to his bedroom.

The lawyer's offices were on the eighth floor of a posh, newly constructed office building on Tubman Road. The building rose twelve storeys, dwarfing all the other buildings on its side of the street. It was stylish and modern yet its neo-sophistication was reminiscent of seventeenth or eighteenth century Asian architecture. In the middle of the huge building, on the ground floor, was a marble statue of a naked woman standing on top of sculpted granite partly immersed in a fountain of water. Jets of water cascaded in curves from her wings, sprinkling all those who approached as well as the labyrinth of plants, surrounding the fountain with a light mist that floated aimlessly all over the floor. He found the elevators near the security desk, entered one and pushed the button for the eighth floor. As he alighted, he saw the sign conspicuously painted on the wall— *Waluballa, Mosonik & Sarakasi Advocates*, with an arrow pointing toward the hallway on the left. He followed the direction to the end of the hallway. On his right, was a double cherry wood door with the lawyers' names marked in gold flakes. The door opened into a large reception area that had a red carpeted floor and walls decked with numerous paintings.

"Mr Sarakasi is in a meeting, Mr Ndeda," the female receptionist said. "May I get you anything—*The Voice* or *Mail*, or perhaps some

tea?" She had cool eyes and a mechanical smile. She spoke English with a little difficulty and, from her accent one could tell that she was from the western part of the country.

"No, thanks," Amu answered.

He sat on the dark brown velvet sofa and glimpsed at the receptionist. She was a medium-sized woman, black in complexion with short hair. She wore high heeled brown pumps and a red tight fitting dress that was understated as was everything else about her. It did not surprise him, though. Lawyers in town had a reputation for not paying their employees very well, according to the gossip at The Closet. All in all, her appearance was modest, a bit unbefitting considering the corporate opulence of her work environment but nevertheless, conservative enough for a legal setting. After a brief wait in the reception area, she ushered him into the lawyer's office.

"Come in, Mr Ndeda. Welcome... Sorry to have kept you waiting. Please sit down." The lawyer closed the door behind him and motioned him to sit. "I know we have not met. My name is Sarakasi ...Wycliffe Sarakasi."

The lawyer extended a firm handshake as Amu sat down. He was a short man in his late forties with a dignified appearance greatly enhanced by his wealth. His hair was expertly shaven and his expensive suit fitted well. He had a relaxed demeanour, a face with keen and intelligent eyes and a warm smile. He gave the impression of a man capable of subduing an enemy with words rather than a machete. The large office was furnished well enough to provide an atmosphere of reverence and invincibility. His desk, an oval knee-hole with a tooled leather top, had all manner of ornaments on display. A smooth wooden sculpture of an elephant was at one end while a picture of the lawyer's family, a big black desk diary and a brass letter opener with brown malachite handle were on the other. There was enough room for a pile of files on the middle. Next to his desk, was a computer, complete with a large monitor and a laser printer, all neatly arranged on a small computer desk flanked on both sides by elegant maple and cherry book shelves. In the far right corner of the office was twenty inch colour television set with a VCR mounted on it. The left wall was panelled with dark wood going from floor to ceiling. Several framed certificates and sketches of great jurists were mounted on the panelling.

"How is Industrial Area? I understand you chaps are affected more severely by the electricity rationing?"

"Oh, yes," Amu replied, not quite sure of the direction of the conversation.

"So, how can I be of help this morning?"

"I want to file a divorce case against my wife," he said, choosing to be direct and to the point. "Let me put it this way, she has filed a case against me and I want to file a case against her as well."

"Hmmm. Looks a little complicated. Let me try to understand. There is already a case in court between you and her yet you still want to file another one?"

"Kind of. You see, a few days ago, I received these papers from the court," he explained while passing a bunch of papers to him. "I have read them, but they don't state my position in the matter. All they ask of me is to agree to some nonsense within fifteen days and I think that it is bullshit—excuse my language. Then, last night, she comes to my house with the police to take my children. The police...as though the police got those children for me. Do you now see my point, Sir?"

"Yes, I can see the papers too."

"So, can you help me?"

"Yes, of course. That is why I am here. But I need to understand a little more. I was wondering. This woman, were you living together as husband and wife at one time?"

"Yes, until last August. We were married in 1986. I went to their home, paid bride-price and all that. In 1990, we registered our marriage at Justice House, the Attorney General's Chambers. Don't ask me for the certificate because I don't have it. She does."

"What happened?"

He started from the beginning, outlining in broad terms his wife's temperamental disposition and how a small rumour could trigger her into taking a gigantic step. He narrated the one particular incident when she left home because of a rumour that he had been seen with another woman. This time, however, relatives talked her into coming back and he, being the kind man that he was, accepted her without even a reprimand. He showed the lawyer the note she had written indicating her will to end the marriage. But, after that, he hoped that his wife would change. Instead, she got worse. Each

time he came home late from work, they would quarrel. She would shamelessly traduce him and spitefully deride his lack of a university degree. So, it happened one night that he couldn't take her brusque and scurrilous confrontations any more. A vicious fight broke out between them. She had started it though, and she even slashed him with a kitchen knife. She ended up in the hospital. When she returned home, she moved into the guest bedroom and eschewed all her matrimonial responsibilities. When he sought to enforce some, especially the conjugal ones, the woman opted to move out of the house altogether.

Although the story was substantially correct, his manner of narrating it seemed to absolve him from any blame whatsoever. His description of the fight and Sembe's culpability gave it a lineament of substantial reality that even he, himself, occasionally doubted. The lawyer listened to him closely, occasionally stroking his chin with a thick black fountain pen or interjecting with a question here and there to seek clarification. Amu went on and on, justifying all his acts and condemning his wife with every breath of his speech. When he believed that he had talked enough, he leaned back in his chair. "Then she files a case in court and two days later attempts to snatch my children," he said. "She has started the war and I am ready for it," he concluded.

After a moment of contemplation, the lawyer raised his face and looked at him. "Amu, perhaps it's too early for you to think of it that way," he said politely.

"How can you say that when she has already taken me to court?"

"You know, the relationship between a man and woman is something that nobody else, including parents, or even the court can interfere with unless the parties so desire. Secondly, it is difficult for women, just as with most men, to throw away a marriage unless the relationship has overrun certain critical limits of tolerance. The mere filing of a case or seeing a lawyer in anger over the other spouse's indiscretion is never the sole indicator that the limit has been reached. I don't know about your case but I am sure we will soon find out..."

"My case is different, though," Amu responded curtly. "The woman has apparently made up her mind that she doesn't want the marriage. I do, too."

“That may appear so but beyond the façade of court papers and self aggrandisement, there might be a subtle undercurrent in her conscience. She may not know this because she doesn’t take time to listen to her heart. It could be the same with you.”

Amu was beginning to feel frustrated with the lawyer. A persistent niggle of trepidation descended on him. In a way, the lawyer started to sound like a marriage counsellor or a priest talking to young lovers. The decision to end the marriage may have been made in haste but the turn of events had now made it inevitable. He did not need a lawyer to advise him on how to reverse the clock. Right now, he needed someone who would be ready to help him fight a battle, not a diplomat in search of a peaceful solution to a trade dispute. The lawyer must have read his mind and, in deference to his sensibilities, obliged him with the reason for his line of argument.

“The reason I am probing you this much is to get a sense of your commitment to the process ahead of us,” he said. “Once the process begins, reversing it becomes a bit difficult. A lot of emotions are shed and bitterness evoked that could be avoided in the first instance, should the parties have read their conscience correctly. In many ways, the lawyers and courts become the greatest stumbling block to reconciliation and the survival of a marriage. It is critical that these issues are examined thoroughly before we make our first move. However, if you are confident that all bases have been covered, then it is fine. We can begin talking about the process itself. Do you understand my point?”

“Yes, I do. But in my case there is already a situation that needs to be taken care of. I don’t understand how my feelings could be of any significance.”

“That is as far as she is concerned but how about you? Do you want the divorce?”

“Of course, yes. What man can live with a woman who doesn’t want him?”

“Do you want the divorce because she wants it or do you want it because you don’t want her or is it both?”

Amu was growing really frustrated with this man. “You lawyers like twisting words and confusing people. I don’t care what she thinks or does. What I know is that I want her out of my life for good.”

“That is fine with me. In fact, it answers all my concerns. Now, let me ask you something, Mr Ndeda. Is there someone in your life, I mean another woman?”

“Why would it matter? But if it helps, yes. I am thinking of marrying her when this is over. This is why I need this matter resolved quickly.”

“I see. Well, then, we shall proceed. Would you like to know about the money issues, I mean my fees and all that before we begin?”

“Oh, yes. Obuya told me you would be reasonable.”

Without hesitation, the lawyer indicated that he would need a deposit of twenty thousand shillings, ten of which were payable immediately. The fees, he said, were based on the anticipation that the case would be a straightforward divorce. However, should there be additional work, additional fees would be charged according to the Advocates Remuneration Rules. The amount he mentioned was exclusive of court fees and out-of-pocket expenses. The court fees would not exceed five thousand shillings and could, in fact, be much less.

When this was settled, Amu paid the lawyer five thousand shillings in cash and wrote a cheque for another five thousand. The lawyer then made Amu go through the whole story of his life while the same was being noted in shorthand by a secretary. When this was done, Amu felt a little relieved. Because he had requested whether something could be done to stop Sembe from taking the children, the lawyer advised him on the possibility of filing for an injunction to stop anybody from interfering with the children’s custody until the court heard and determined the issue. But the lawyer cautioned him. “Amu, since your children are all girls and they are between the ages of eleven and six, I don’t see how you can eventually have custody if your wife pushes this matter,” the lawyer said.

“What do you mean? I am the children’s father.”

“And your wife is their mother. Both of you are equally entitled to the custody of the children. But because you parents have made a mess of your lives and are at this point separated either legally or not, somebody must have custody or the government takes over.”

“And that person is me. Look, the woman ran away and left me with the children. How can she now say that she wants them?”

“Of course, your point is valid and quite understandable. It may indeed be one of the factors that the court may consider. However, it is not the most important one.”

“What could be more important than a father being there for his children and taking care of them?”

“The welfare of those children!”

“Precisely. How can she even begin to claim that she is interested in the welfare of the children when, for over one year, she has never paid a penny for their school fees, food, clothing or even a birthday present?”

“I know how you feel about this matter. But, it is my duty to make you aware of the legal situation that we are dealing with so that you can make an informed decision”. The lawyer gave him a very serious look and continued. “The way in which the court may define a child’s welfare goes much further than one parent’s demonstrated concern. It includes the emotional as well as physical development of the child. In most cases, a child’s physical and emotional development may be well served if it is living with its mother. Thus, children under fifteen years of age usually end up with their mothers. The issue of welfare is tied to the age of the children, perhaps unduly, and then, of course, to the economic as well as physical circumstances of the parties. Courts have adopted this view in the majority of its cases and chances that they will alter this position in your case could be very remote indeed. In any event, there must be a disqualifying factor that is grave and debilitating before a court can be persuaded to depart from this position.”

“So, in my case, the fact that she absconded the matrimonial home cannot work in my favour?”

“It could. However, remember that your case is made even more difficult by the fact that your children are all females.”

“I cannot give up my children without a fight. After all, now they are in my custody. So I think we should go ahead and file the injunction,” he said, demonstrating that he had a good ear for legal subtleties. He knew that he couldn’t compete with a lawyer but he could certainly communicate with one.

“Amu, the assumption or rule that little girls should be with their mothers may not be politically correct in the court of public opinion. Today, things have changed and both men and women are capable

of providing care for their children. All I am saying is that our courts have been slow in appreciating this fact and still envisage society as though it has not changed since the last century.”

“But I think the woman should not have a blank cheque to do what she pleases, irrespective of the interests of the man.”

“You are correct. This is why I think the injunction is necessary so that nobody steals the children without the other’s knowledge. The injunction will create some kind of recourse until the court makes a firm order regarding the issue. I also think it will be good for the children if they stay in one place and when the matter is resolved, you can explain to them exactly what is going on—why they have to go and stay with Mummy, if that is the ultimate verdict.”

“When can this be done?”

“Immediately! We will prepare the necessary papers by this afternoon and you will have to come back and sign the affidavits today so that we can be in court tomorrow.”

Amu was delighted at the prospect of the matter being in court the next day. He left the lawyer’s office and went to fetch Cosmas at the bank. He found him busy so they couldn’t talk much. Amu promised to call him later. He then wandered down Nange Street, admiring the cars on display. He took his car from a parking lot outside the Mid Town Market then drove to his house in Kileleshwa. He called Sally from the house to tell her that he would not be in the next day. He asked her to keep all his matters pending until Saturday. At three, he was back in the lawyer’s office but the affidavits were not ready. He waited in the reception area until five o’clock, when he was finally called into the clerk’s office and shown the documents. He was asked to read them before signing. They were substantially a reproduction of what they had discussed with selective emphasis on the salience of his case against her claim for the custody. They were couched in some language that was probably consonant with the general decorum of the court but from which little sense could be derived by lay people like him. He signed in the space indicated to him by Bidonge, the lawyer’s clerk, and left.

When he came out of the lawyer’s office, it was after five thirty. The heat of the afternoon was slowly yielding to the gentle breeze of sunset. The town blossomed with the out-of-work crowd,

scrambling for the few Matatu's and buses to get home before dark. He strode across Tubman Road, walked through the Curio kiosks and came to Nange Street through a narrow stretch between City Market and Post Bank Building. He intended to look at some furniture displayed in a shop window adjacent the petrol station but as he crossed the street, he saw Sembe emerging from the same shop. She was in the company of a man he had never seen before. He was tall, light skinned and with long well-groomed hair. He wore a navy blue suit, imported shoes and a gold watch on his left wrist. They headed straight to a new Peugeot 504 parked in front of the shop then drove off. Now, he remembered that it was the same car she was driving when they met at Auntie Didi's house. Suddenly, he felt fury engulf his body as his thoughts ran amok. The woman found herself a boyfriend—this is why she had filed for divorce. She wanted to be free to marry that man. He found his car at the parking lot facing the petrol station and he drove towards Kileleshwa.

The court building was a beehive of activity that Friday morning. The hallways were busy with lawyers chatting with their clients, idlers milling about and clerks moving in and out of the many rooms carrying files in their hands. It was as though everyone was anticipating the weekend and therefore keen to finalise their errands before then. Mr Sarakasi was well known around here. He was greeted by most of the clerks who hurriedly walked past them and, was fondly received by a group of lawyers standing outside the judges' chambers on the west side of the building. As he came to learn later, the man who was occupying the room in front of which everybody was waiting, was Justice Memar Kundubhai. Affairs inside Justice Kundubhai's chambers were proceeding at a reasonable speed. In a matter of fifteen minutes, two groups had gone in and come out. Each time a group came out, a man would emerge from the room and call out names from a printed list. Those whose names were called would enter then the man would follow them and close the door.

Leaning against the wall and observing his lawyer's every move, Amu waited patiently for their turn to enter the judge's chambers. Despite the intensity of the moment, he was unable to shake out of his mind the thought of his wife and that tall man living together. Inasmuch as he recognised how little control he would have over her given the current state of their relationship, still, he had to come to terms with the idea that his wife could love somebody else. Their relationship was special despite its difficulties, and he knew for certain that his wife could never relate to another man in the same way. He had seen it in her eyes and felt it in his heart. He couldn't fathom any better explanation for her latest action other than she being desperate and lacking companionship. She was vulnerable—easy prey for a man wishing to have some fun and maybe, money too. This is what he judged this man to be—vermin, a traitor, a corruptor of minds and a home breaker. His wife needed protection from his sort and he was the right person for the job.

He was so deep in thought that he did not notice Mr Sarakasi leaving after talking briefly to Bidonge, his clerk.

"Mr Ndeda, Mr Ndeda," Bidonge called him in a low voice.

"Yes," he lifted his head, thinking that it was their turn to go in. "Can we go in now?"

"No. I have just finished filing the papers and the matter will be placed before the judge shortly. I think it may be this afternoon when the application will be heard. If you like, you can hang around or perhaps, have some lunch and then come back at about two o'clock. Mr Sarakasi has gone to the courts in Milimani and will meet you here then."

Amu walked to a telephone booth near City Hall and called Cosmas. Fortunately, he wasn't busy so they agreed to have lunch together. Cosmas picked him up and they drove to the kiosks near Wigan Hotel. At two o'clock sharp he was back at the courts. Nobody was around except he, which made him wonder whether the programme had changed or it was just too early. He decided to stick around for a while. Ten minutes later, a group of up-country men and women joined him. They did not care for his presence and were engaged in a heated conversation in *Kikuyu*. It was something about land—this he could tell. Soon, the group was joined by their lawyer, a burly and portly man with a worn-out brief case. In a

short while, Justice Memar Kundubhai arrived, followed closely by his clerk. He was an elderly Asian man with a bald head. Walking with his shoulders tipped in ponderous dignity, he unlocked the panelled door and stepped inside. His clerk rapidly went in, too, and closed the door. That was a sign that the afternoon business was about to commence. What worried Amu was that neither his lawyer nor his clerk was there. He was temporarily relieved when the big group and their lawyer were called in. In no time, Mr Sarakasi emerged from somewhere in the hallway.

Justice Memar Kundubhai wasn't the welcoming type. His chamber was plain, a bit cramped and files were heaped all over the place. His oversized leather seat and three big mahogany tables in T-formation stood amid heaps of books, papers and dusty cartons. A hardwood bookshelf filled to capacity with volumes of the *Law of Kenya*, *All England Law Reports* and various treatises of English law dominated one side of the wall. The books were not confined to the shelves. Some were on the table in front of him, others on the chairs and a good number spread helter-skelter on the floor. Generally, there was a sense of disarray which was intensified by the musty smell of old books and papers. On the other wall, huge portraits of His Excellency the President and that of the judge himself were conspicuously displayed. Behind his seat, was a large widow with dusty curtains. Despite its turbidness, the room offered ample sitting space for visitors.

After they were seated, the judge turned around and pulled out one of the new folders from a heap of files on his left. "Mr Sarakasi, did you finalise the probate in that matter?" he asked, while looking at the pages in the folder.

"No, my Lord, several other issues came up so we ended up on appeal."

"Oh! Well, good luck, then. Now, what about this matter?"

"My Lord, this matter is just beginning but, already, the parties are having some problems with regard to custody of the children."

"Surely you are not asking me to make any orders on that issue without hearing both sides? Well, I can see here that there are three young children, all of them females. Why don't we get the other party? I can give you a date next week."

“My Lord, I am not asking for any substantive orders for custody. Legally, the parties are not even separated yet. All I am asking of you is to issue orders to stop her from hijacking the children when their father is away or doing something crazy until this court determines the issue one way or the other. My Lord will see from my client’s affidavit that an attempt was made to do just that two nights ago and that is certainly not in the interest of the children.”

“The problem with an *ex-parte* order, if I were to give one, is that your client will become complacent. You will keep on extending the orders and not taking definite steps to have the matter finalised. In the meantime, the other party will be denied the right to have her side of the story heard. Mr Sarakasi, you know my views about *ex-parte* orders?”

“I do, my Lord. However, I am constrained in this instance to ask for one because children are involved. It is not my intention, nor that of my client’s to delay this matter unduly. He is a very busy company executive and would like to have this matter resolved in the best interest of his children and with the least inconvenience to him and the court.”

“Well, I also think that moving the children back and forth is not in anybody’s best interest. I will make an order to retain the status quo for fourteen days. Within that time, you must serve them and be ready for an *inter-partes* hearing of the application.” The judge scribbled something on the pages inside the folder. He then turned to face them. “Mr Sarakasi, you must remember to advise your client appropriately. I do not wish to see the parties use the children as a weapon against each other. Secondly, since the children involved are minors and they are females, the determination of the issue of custody may be dictated by those factors. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Very well,” he said, raising his head. “Those will be my orders.”

These words brought an end to their brief sojourn in the judge’s chambers and set them towards the door then into the hallway. Mr Sarakasi couldn’t hide his delight at the outcome of the case. “That is good. That is a good a start,” he said while adjusting his silk tie and handing his briefcase and file to Bidonge. He also gave him instructions to extract the court order and serve it on Sembe.

It seemed as though she had been gone for a month or longer. Her in-tray was overflowing with papers and her phone messages were heaped beside a small vase of flowers that had wilted ages ago. Perhaps hypnotised by the latter, everything in the office looked old and worn out—from the colourful Persian rug that she had bought in Dubai last year to the murky green visitor's sofa that she had inherited from the former occupant of the office. At the window, the white drapes, which for some reason seemed at odds with the rest of the furnishings, were definitely in need of some cleaning and even replacement. She walked to the window, perhaps to examine them more closely, but her attention was drawn to the happenings across the road at Uhuru Park. There, huge formations of Kenya Army, Police, General Service Unit and all other disciplined forces were preparing for the coming *Madaraka Day* celebrations. Across the park, the city's beautiful skyline occupied the entire width of her vision. She could see the tall Kenyatta International Conference Centre, the ultra modern Star Duck House and, far to the left, the newly-built Grand Duke Hotel. Somewhere to the east, was the city's industrial area and, of course, EAP, where her husband was working. With this thought, she walked back to her seat. She grabbed the court papers again, scrutinised them thoroughly and then made a telephone call.

Wanja Peters was an experienced lawyer and Sembe was impressed by the way she had handled her case so far—only sometimes she felt that they were working at cross-purposes. From the very first time they discussed her case, Wanja seemed bent on “fixing” Amu. It was like a vendetta of some sort, a grudge she bore against men that came across frostily in her handling of a divorce matter. It made Sembe wonder whether she could turn down any brief by a male client in similar circumstances. But as they say, lawyers are like chameleons, they change with their surroundings. The affront that Wanja was displaying against her husband could very well be a mere morale booster or just a façade, meant to solidify her confidence in the lawyer's services. Whatever the case, Sembe resolved to stay focused on getting custody of her children. She knew that if she spent all her time hating Amu, she might not be useful to herself and her children. Moreover, she still felt a little hesitant about the whole prospect of complete separation because she knew that, as far as her children were concerned, Daddy and Mummy would never be replaced by anybody or anything.

The telephone discussion was brief. The meeting at the lawyer's office was scheduled for three o'clock in the afternoon. She wasn't keen on spending a lot of time with Wanja because Toni had a function at the Hotel Intercontinental that she had promised to attend. The gist of their meeting was the court papers that had been served on her by her husband's lawyer last Friday. Since she was going to Naivasha with Toni for the weekend to celebrate her appointment to the World Bank project, she decided to let the matter rest until this week. Moreover, Wanja had assured her that the law was on her side and that she did not need to worry about a thing. It would be difficult, she had said, for Amu to get custody of the children since they were young. She believed her even in the face of a court order that seemed to freeze the matter for fourteen days.

Wanja was in an upbeat mood when Sembe walked into her office that afternoon. Her face gleamed with an extroverted smile, somewhat exaggerated by the thick red lipstick, round glittering earrings and black curly braids pulled away from her face into a band tied pony tail. She was a beautiful woman, no doubt, and could do without the make-up, Sembe thought. Except for the soft purring of the fan, the atmosphere in the office was serene—an impetuous relief from the hustle and bustle of the street below. The air was cool and redolent, quite in keeping with the splendour and flamboyance radiating from the host and her staff. When she was offered a cold drink, Sembe's perception of the magnanimity of the host was reaffirmed.

The subject of discussion needed no introduction. After taking one or two sips of her drink, Sembe handed the court papers to Wanja. She looked at them anxiously as though she had anticipated their content and smiled again. Then, she removed Sembe's file from one of the cabinets below her desk.

"Just as I thought!" she said. "Our boys don't seem to remember what the law is or they have conveniently forgotten, waiting for us to remind them."

"What exactly are they saying on those papers?" Sembe asked, more or less to keep herself in the conversation.

"This here," Wanja said, pointing to a single sheet of paper that had a court seal imprinted on it, "is a court order forbidding both you and your husband from changing the children's current abode

until the issue of their custody is determined by the court. This other one is a copy of the application in which he is asking for custody. Attached to it is the affidavit that supports the application. We are required to do three things. Firstly, we do not take or attempt to take the children now until we go back to court. Secondly, we respond to their allegations. Thirdly, we attend court on the day specified and oppose their application.”

“How do we respond to these allegations? You know they are not true.”

“By filing and serving on his lawyer what is called a ‘replying affidavit’. Since I have all the facts that are pertinent to the issue of custody, I will draw up the affidavit and have you sign it, if that suits you?”

“That’s perfect. So, how soon do you need me?”

“I can have Karimi bring the affidavit to your office immediately after it is ready for you to sign. That will be tomorrow afternoon.”

“Fine. Let me go now. I will wait for him tomorrow,” Sembe said while standing to leave.

“Hey, what is the hurry?”

“I’m going back to the office for a short meeting at four, then leaving at five to attend a friend’s party at the Intercontinental. See you, Miss Peters, and thanks.”

“We will talk tomorrow. But remember, read the affidavit before signing it and, if you have any questions, call me,” Wanja said as she escorted her client to the door.

She wasn’t going back to the office. The truth was that she wanted to buy a new silk tie for Toni. She had seen it at the Little Blue Boutique on Dubai Street and hoped that it was still available. She wanted to thank him for the wonderful weekend and the support he had given her. When she stepped out of the building, the torrid afternoon heat engulfed her body instantly. By the time she arrived at the shop, her back was drenched in sweat. Fortunately, the tie was still in stock and the attendant was more than willing to offer a special discount. When she finished with the purchase, it was about four thirty. She walked to Macdonald Café on Standard Street and settled down to enjoy a glass of passion juice while waiting for Toni. As usual, he was on time. Together, they walked to the Hotel Intercontinental.

The cocktail party was all she had expected and more. During the party, Toni paid special attention to her and she liked it. He made sure that she was comfortable, served with drinks of her choice and introduced to all the bigwigs of the company. Never before had she felt appreciated and adored as much as this. Later, when Toni dropped her off at her house, she so badly wanted him to stay but did not know how to ask. Moreover, she wasn't ready yet to breach the rules of their relationship—the rules that she had set. When she got out of the car, she could very well have walked straight to the door and waved goodbye but she turned round to the driver's side and held Toni's hand. No words were spoken. Then, she bent to kiss him and, suddenly, a huge rock hit the car's windscreen. To their surprise, Amu emerged from the side of the house, charging straight to where they were.

"I will kill you today, you bastard!" he shouted, pointing at Toni. "How can you sleep with my wife in broad daylight? Why don't you look for your own? Do you know that she has three children and a home? You home breaker, today you will know me!"

Toni got out of the car, bewildered. Amu headed straight towards him and hit him with his fist. Toni went down to his knees. Sembe tried to restrain him but he shoved her to the side with such force that she fell on the grass. Amu gave Toni a kick in the groin and he let out a long howl. Then, he descended on him kicking and punching wildly. Sembe was wailing and calling for the guards. By the time Amu was restrained by the security guards, Toni had been badly beaten. He was bleeding from the nose, his clothes were soiled and torn. Sembe was kneeling by his side, crying.

"I will call the police and, this time, you are going to jail, you idiot," she moaned.

"Let me go to jail for protecting my family," he retorted, while struggling to free himself from the guards.

"Which family? Your family is in Kisumu. Remember the woman who was bought by your auntie for a meagre twenty thousand to leave you? You remember her? I don't want you and I can sleep with anyone I want."

The security guards frog-matched Amu to the garage. Despite his rather awkward situation, Amu was still yelling obscenities and vowing to beat the man some more. Two Administration Policemen

guarding a nearby house of a senior civil servant showed up at the scene. They were in uniforms and both carried guns. One was short and muscular with a raggedy face while the other was slightly tall and dark with sinewy legs. They grabbed Amu by the throat and pinned him to the wall. The tall one restrained Amu with the butt of his gun while the other placed handcuffs on him. Amu struggled against their grip but the policemen were far too horned in their trade. They hit him several times with their batons and kicked him hard with their boots. Amu made a sharp squeaking noise as he writhed from side to side like a child suffering from dysentery. When he calmed down, the tall policeman jerked him from the wall and threw him to the ground, ordering him to sit upright. “*Kaa chini!*” he shouted. Sembe narrated how he had destroyed a car and assaulted both Toni and her. This drove the policemen into more rage. They kicked Amu again and again and when he rolled on the ground like a ball, screaming, they had a good laugh out of it. The tall one grabbed Amu by the handcuffs and propped him onto his feet. He made no effort to resist. Blood streamed from his nose. The policeman held him by the waist and dragged him out of the compound and toward Nyatta Police Post.

Chapter Twelve

THE TWO NIGHTS Amu spent at Nyatta Police Post and the day in Ndondosha law courts consumed most of the week. Yet, he accomplished little in terms of solving the problems that were tormenting him. The lawyer who bailed him out was yet to be paid. His car, vandalised on the night of his arrest was still at the police yard awaiting removal and repair and the case against him was fixed for hearing in a month's time. Furthermore, the matter had the potential of affecting his job. In total, he had missed four days of work, a fact that could precipitate some problems with his boss. He was also worried that Sembe and her collaborators could use this incident to solidify their campaign against his claim for custody. Now that he thought about it, perhaps it was never a good idea to attack Sembe's boyfriend in that manner. He could have hired an assassin or just some thug to inflict damage on his car. After several beers at The Closet, his mental faculties were clogged so much so that he could hardly distinguish between a viable action and a perilous one. He couldn't even recall the sequence of events after he left the bar. All he remembered was being booked and thrown into the cell. When told by the police that he had assaulted a man and a woman, he denied it vehemently at first but, upon seeing his bruised knuckles and feeling the pain in his ribs, he knew that it was probably true. The whole story became clear the next day when a Police Inspector informed him of the assault charge and sought a statement from him with regard to the incident. Although he denied the charge, both at the police post and in court, he was aware that the evidence against him would be overwhelming. He considered himself lucky to have been granted bail.

When he reported to work on Wednesday morning, the news about his arrest and subsequent arraignment in court had reached all and sundry. Sally was particularly sympathetic as though she shared his anguish. She gave him a quick report on the occurrences

during his absence and left. His desk was jumbled with files, pending mail, repair notices and bills. He went through them quickly, keen to mark some for Sally to deal with and forwarding others to Mr Groningen. He signed the repair notices and marked them for the attention of Kinuthia, the head foreman. The numerous *Harambee* invitation cards and the unsolicited job applications went into the trash can while personal letters from friends and relatives and useful subscription magazines found space in his desk drawer. The bills went to Opiyo in Accounts. When finished, he decided to go to the cafeteria, not because he was famished, but so that he could catch a few moments of solitude and contemplation.

He sat by himself in the corner and ordered tea and *Samosas*. While sipping tea, he wondered whether every divorce followed a similar path. Did parties have to fight over custody? Did they have to be jealous of each other's involvement with a third party? It baffled his mind that nothing seemed to work out positively for him. At every turn, he got deeper and deeper into trouble with no reprieve in sight. Could his wife and he find some middle ground, some level of understanding that would ensure a modicum of stability in their separate lives or was divorce eternally destined to be all war and no peace, he wondered.

Immersed in deliberation, Amu hardly noticed Peter Wanyonyi, the accounts controller, walking to his table. Peter, unaware of his annoying interruption, asked, "*Jaduong*, may I join you?"

"By all means, *Omwami*," Amu responded, not quite sure what his friend was up to.

Wanyonyi pulled up a chair and sat at his side. "So this is where you hide when you're not in your office?" he scoffed sheepishly.

Amu did not say a thing.

"Hey, *Jaduong*, I am happy to see you," Wanyonyi said, moving closer to him.

Amu turned towards him, his expression mired in deliberation. "Yes, *Omwami*, I am, too," he said.

"You were away. Were you out of the country?"

"I was in Kenya."

"Hmm, but on Monday I didn't see you at the meeting."

"Which meeting?" Amu asked in disquiet.

"Then you must have been out of the office."

"I have been out the whole week. I only came back today."

"Well, that explains it. A meeting was called by the new boss. She wanted to inform everybody of the impending changes to the company's operations. And, if I remember correctly, she mentioned something about that Quality Committee of yours. She said that you are not moving as fast as you should. You may want to touch base with your friends to find out what it is that the woman wants, or else things may happen behind your back. You know how EAP is."

Peter Wanyonyi was a pleasant character who had spent the greater part of his adult life working for EAP. When Amu was employed, Wanyonyi was already an accounts supervisor. Over the years, he rose through the ranks, assuming his current position a year ago when his predecessor was fired. He had no profound academic education, except that he had matured in his profession through distant learning and on-the-job experience. But, he was very perceptive and offered wise counsel. Amu liked him just as much as he hated the bunch of expatriates in the company.

"Thanks for alerting me," Amu said. "I had no idea about the meeting. Why didn't she issue a notice a week before?" he asked.

"New management, new ways of doing things! So what was happening with you?"

"Man, I was in lots of trouble. You know about me and Sembe?"

"Yeah. I thought you two were separated?"

"Yes. She has now filed a case against me. She wants a divorce. She also wants the children. But, you know what? I discovered that she has a boyfriend so I went to talk to her about it. I was concerned, mainly because of the children, that she was making it rather too obvious—that she was sleeping around ... you know. But my good intentions were not taken kindly. The woman and her man felt so offended. They started fighting me, man. I had no option but to defend myself so I broke their car's windscreen and gave out a few punches before the police came and dragged me to Nyatta Police Post. Now, it is I who is charged with assault. Can you imagine that?"

"Do you have a lawyer? *Jaduong*, you need a lawyer," Peter Wanyonyi asked, almost immediately.

"I have one."

"Oh, you do? Who is he?"

“A Mr Sarakasi.”

“Oh, I know him. He is my *Mlamwa*. His brother married a woman from our home. I thought he deals with divorce and property transfer only?”

“He got a young man in his office to do my criminal case while he handles the divorce.”

“Oh, that is good. I can tell you, my friend, life has taught me that it is difficult to compete with a woman. They always get what they want because, in every situation, people feel sympathy for them. They are always seen as the victims and rarely as the villains. So you see, our society today is likely to favour a woman’s cause more than a man’s, especially in a case such as yours. What I can tell you is that it is important to find a way of dealing with the issue before it gets out of hand.”

“That is true, *Omwami*. You know even the first time we quarrelled, she started it. She even slashed my chest with a knife. But, when my mother and other relatives came to discuss the issue, they blamed me. So, I think you are right. Now that the magistrate hearing the case is also a woman, I might just end up in jail.”

“You know, if I were you, I would talk to Sarakasi about the possibility of settling the dispute, maybe by offering to repair the car or something like that, you know. It is not cowardice to take a strategic retreat and live to fight more important battles in the future.”

Wanyonyi’s advice seemed very practical. Later in the day, Amu called Sarakasi and, true to his expectations, the lawyer agreed to talk to Sembe about the matter. By the end of the week, an agreement was struck. He was to pay ten thousand shillings, the cost of the replacement of the windscreen, and an additional five thousand for Toni’s medical treatment. Added to the ten thousand that Mr Sarakasi had requested for his fee, and the fifty five thousand that the garage was demanding for the repairs to his Volvo, the one-hour ordeal was worth the princely sum of eighty thousand shillings. Mr Sarakasi hurriedly arranged for a mention date in Ndondosha law courts where Toni and Amu both recorded their agreement. The case was ordered to be withdrawn. That was only a day before he was in court again for the custody case.

Towering among the fluted columns of Nairobi's downtown skyscrapers, the International Trade House stood tall, its glassy exterior looking impossibly graceful. From a distance, the building appeared like a tall monument made of nothing but polished glass. Walk closer though and you could see the huge concrete columns that separated the floors and held the panels of glass in position, and the dark patches of scarred paint on one side left by the fire that gutted its eleventh and twelfth floor some years back. High in the building, the offices of Mbale Enterprises found space on the far eastern corner of the tenth floor. In there, John Kisa, the chief executive, was sitting in his huge leather chair, thinking about a conversation he had just had with Ayugi, his wife. He stroked his chin in thought while his gaze shot through the huge glass windows to the street below. He had a magnificent view of the Agha Khan walk, Reinsurance Plaza and the bell bottomed Co-operative House. In between the tall buildings, he caught a glimpse of Jomo Kenyatta International Airport and a glimmer of its control tower punctuating the wide stretch of grassland that dominated the eastern horizon. Feeling mildly refreshed by the outdoor vista, he sprang up from his seat and paced across the carpeted floor of his immaculate office. The décor, complemented by African artworks on the wall, crystal glasses and decanters spread on an oak bookshelf with a cherry lacquer finish and the immense mahogany spread of his desk, bore the true image of his success.

Ever since he made the decision to go after the Ndeda's mansion in Kileleshwa, his mind was preoccupied. Although at first, he saw his obligation simply as that of helping Sembe—ensuring that she got all the protection she needed from a philandering husband—he had since become more interested in the gains that could come with it. The businessman in him hungered for more than just a thank you dinner after the conclusion of the divorce. He wanted the property in Kileleshwa and the possibility seemed very real unless something drastic, like say, Sembe and her husband getting back together, happened. While the urge to acquire the property made his emotions rise to unimaginable heights, the desire to manipulate the situation to benefit him presented some kind of challenge that evoked in him a senseless drive to conquer. This is why when it appeared that there was laxity in filing a suit for the divestiture of

property from Amu because nobody had the necessary details of all the properties, he arranged to have the same clandestinely obtained from Amu's lawyer and supplied to Wanja. His means was a little irregular yet quite in line with the prevailing business climate in the city. Through an old acquaintance, he approached the lawyer's clerk and bribed him with money. By that morning, the clerk had agreed to deliver the copies to another friend at a city restaurant. That, too, had been accomplished. All that remained was for his wife to pick up the documents and take them to the lawyer. He walked back to his chair and, like a preacher getting ready to seek divine intervention, sat back and closed his eyes. His hopes were that his wife would soon call to report the conclusion of the mission. Fortunately, he had kept the afternoon free of any appointments, meetings or any other interruption.

The order was recorded by consent of both parties. Amu understood this to mean that both lawyers were in agreement on the issue before the judge. He wondered how this could be. He and his wife, the principals in the suit, were not in agreement on the issue of custody. Perhaps he lacked the intellectual wherewithal to comprehend the propriety of a legal order of this nature. He looked across to where Sembe was seated with her brother, Tim. She was fidgeting with a pencil in her hand, obviously distressed. The court clerk was already at the door, calling another matter. Mr Sarakasi rose to leave the judge's chambers and so did Sembe's lawyer and her retinue. He signalled to Amu and both of them went to the hallway. He did not waste any time. "The judge is of the view that we should seek the opinion of Juvenile Protection Officers. You see, the court feels that the experts can best advice on the welfare of the children," he said hurriedly.

"What does that mean? Can I still keep the children?" he asked in rapid succession.

"Yes. You see, according to the law, the judge must take into account the welfare of the children when granting custody. But in this case both you and your wife are working so there is no question that you have the financial means to look after your children. The

decision must therefore rely on factors that are not explicit in the affidavits. These can only be ascertained by an expert, in this case, the Juvenile Protection Officer. So, the judge has ordered that the Protection Officer investigate your circumstances and those of your wife and report back to court.”

“So, what am I expected to do?”

“Well, in many cases in which I have been involved, the Juvenile Protection Officer makes contact, and then you go to their offices in Fimbo House. You are interviewed, after which they decide whether they want to visit your house or your children’s school or whatever. It is entirely up to them. Thereafter, they draft a report and file it in court.”

“How long does this take?”

“Well, the court has given them fourteen days to file the report.”

“So, we shall know after that what they are saying?”

“Yes. But I would advise you to get involved so that you are in control of the process. Most of the time, the report favours the woman, especially in a case where the children are girls. I told you from the beginning that this would be an uphill task. The girls usually go with the mother.”

“Are you saying that I should call the Juvenile Protection people myself or what?”

“Look, I have another case. Can you stop by the office later and we will talk about this fully?”

“Yes, I could do that but after work, say, five thirty. Would that be suitable?”

“Yes. That’s fine. See you then.”

Amu glanced at his watch. It was now eleven thirty. He had taken a day off from work. His experience with the courts was that you never know when you might finish. Sometimes, you have to wait until afternoon to get your case mentioned by the judge so it was prudent to give it a whole day. As he walked to the parking lot, he saw Sembe and her lawyer talking. Because of their proximity to his car, he turned back and walked through the court buildings and onto City Hall Way. Briskly, he crossed the street and walked straight towards Starline Coffee House on Mama Ngina Street. Undecided whether to patronise the restaurant at that very moment and overcome by the discomfort of battling for custody of his children,

he lingered at the entrance for a little while. The agile beggar must have noticed his loss of thought. “*Mdosi*, since morning I have eaten nothing. Spare me some change,” he said, raising his ravaged face and fingerless hand to the attention of what could be his benefactor. Amu brushed him aside, taking no notice of his malevolent look and walked into the restaurant.

Unlike the street outside, Starline was calm with its society clientele, mainly lawyers, talking in low tones while sipping expensive cappuccinos. He walked past a wooden curtain and took a seat beside a big leafy plant. He leaned back in the chair and stretched his arm to smooth his suit. He saw a waiter set a cup of cappuccino on the table next to his. Amu wasn’t sure he needed anything to eat but, since he was there, he might as well drink some tea. Soon, the waiter was standing next to him. He was a lean man in his mid twenties and so eager to please. “And what can I get you today, sir?” His English was impeccable. “Would you like a cup of our famous cappuccino with some Danish croissants or our own veggie *Samosas*?”

“May I look at the menu, if that’s okay?”

“By all means, sir. I will be right back.”

When the waiter disappeared, Amu’s eyes fell upon a group of well-dressed young women at the far end of the restaurant. They were chatting incessantly about a wedding they had attended over the weekend, occasionally jeering at one another, laughing and puffing cigarettes in an endless chain. Feeling censorious of their decorum in a public place, he pulled out a bunch of court papers from his coat pocket and laid them on the table. He perused the pages, waiting for his waiter to come back. When he did, Amu flipped through the menu and ordered tea and veggie *Samosas*.

“Would you care to have lunch here, today, sir? We have a lunch special of marinated roast chicken breasts and deep-fried potatoes or rice, the best, sir.” Amu looked at the man under his furrowed brow, hoping that that he would stop nagging him after he placed his order.

“Just hot tea and *Samosas*, today. Thank you.”

While he waited for the order, he looked across the dim light of the restaurant at the women again. His eyes had become accustomed to the surroundings. He noticed that one of the women was

Oracha...yes, Mary Oracha, a former secretary to his wife. The last he heard was that she left the ministry to join the Income Tax Department. It was believed she was the predator type, adept at playing men to her wishes and keen on taking flight when the circumstances favoured her no more. His first close encounter with Oracha was when she showed up unexpectedly in his office to ask for a loan. She told him that her brother was enrolling in a teachers' training college and she needed money to pay his fees. Her timing was perfect, or not so perfect. At that time, Sembe was in Westlands Hospital for the delivery of their youngest daughter. That afternoon, she seemed reluctant to leave his office, even after he gave her some money. In the end, she asked Amu to take her home. He obliged her but only because the commuter Matatus had gone on strike. After that day, Oracha kept making overtures to him, often calling him whenever Sembe was away at meetings or on leave. He never encouraged her and, eventually, she tired. Here she was again after many years.

Amu decided that he was going to have his tea and leave. Fortunately, Oracha and her group were too involved in their own conversation to notice his presence. He was going to shift to another chair and turn his back when he saw Bidonge, his lawyer's clerk, enter the restaurant. He walked straight to where Oracha was seated. Surely he couldn't be the one the girls were waiting for, he thought. Then Amu saw Bidonge talk to Oracha. The two were still talking when Ayugi, Sembe's good friend, entered. She, too, joined the group, but did not sit. It seemed as though she was interested in the discussion between Bidonge and Oracha. In a moment, the three of them walked out of the restaurant. What could his lawyer's clerk be talking about with his enemy? Curiosity got the better of him. He tossed a fifty shillings note on the table and signalled to the waiter that he was leaving.

As he left the restaurant, he saw Ayugi's Suzuki parked in the opposite lane. He could remember seeing the car earlier but, somehow, it did not register in his mind. The three were now walking towards Standard Street. He decided to follow them. When they reached Utawala Café, they turned right into the arcade leading to Kenyatta Avenue. They stood for a while, seemingly deciding on where to go next. He then saw Ayugi lead the way into an electronics

shop. He waited for about two minutes and then walked past the shop's window. The many television sets on display were colouring the scene. The trio was now in the shop. He saw Bidonge pull out a bunch of papers from the inside of his coat, which he passed to Oracha. She scanned them quickly and then passed the same to Ayugi who shoved them into her handbag without looking. Ayugi then removed her purse and pulled some money which she gave to Oracha. Oracha counted the notes before giving them to Bidonge. He counted the money too then, put it in the inner pocket of his coat. He walked out. The two women followed him but headed in a different direction.

Meanwhile, from across the parking lot, Tim was watching his sister. When Sembe finished with her lawyer, she joined him and they walked straight to Fillister Ogutu's office on the fifth floor of Fimbo House. Ogutu was a friend from college. She was a tall black girl who had become famous at college for leaving her husband of ten years for a young college graduate. Those who know her had told the story of how she was married immediately after graduating with "O" levels at Lola Girl's High School. Her husband, a nondescript school teacher, decided to send her to Boma High School for "A" Levels despite advice to the contrary. He paid the school fees and met all other expenses. After "A" levels, she had twins. She had to leave them with the man when she joined the University of Nairobi. Sembe came to know her in second year. At the time, Ogutu had started seeing a young man in her class named Sospeter Nyikosi, and the rumours were everywhere. Her friendship with Ogutu arose out of her indifference to the whole issue. Sembe did not join the group of girls who openly castigated Ogutu for her unfaithfulness. She steered clear of any controversy involving Ogutu and Nyikosi, even when the wars were brought to her doorstep. At one time, three of her friends decided to evict Nyikosi from Ogutu's room. The whole saga ended in utter mayhem, with Ogutu chasing one of the girls to Sembe's room. After college, Nyikosi went to Canada on a government scholarship but not before marrying a girl from Kenyatta University. Ogutu left her first husband and later married a civil servant as a second wife.

Ogututu's friendship with Sembe became even stronger after college when they both took jobs in the civil service. Together with Ayugi and Marren, they formed a women's *Bura* with the intention of boosting their friendship and assisting with minor financial needs. The *Bura* had grown to accommodate a membership of about twelve women, all college graduates. Its financial base would be staggering if the members did not appropriate profits at the end of each year. Members of *Bura* interacted beyond the levels of their organisation. There were very few secrets among them. Their children knew one another and celebrated birthdays together. Their husbands, too, were informally involved in the *Bura*, if only to offer support and participate in its yearly parties, outings, picnics and even Harambees. *Bura* was also a rallying ground for support whenever a member had problems. That is why *Bura* members were like sisters, each member eager to assist the other whenever a call of distress was sounded.

"Hey, Sem, I thought you were in court today?" Ogutu asked as soon as Sembe entered her office.

"I was," Sembe sighed. "In fact, I am just from there."

"So, what did they say? Are you going to get the children?"

"Not yet. It is the reason I have come. The court wants a Juvenile Protection Officer's report. My lawyer informed me that they work in this office. Do you know any one of them?"

"Ahaa. They are in this office. I know a couple of them. In fact, I know all of them. What exactly does the court want from them?"

"My lawyer told me that they have to assess my fitness to have the children. The court wants to know whether I can take care of them. The lawyer also told me that they should be coming to look at my house and things like that. Afterwards, they compile a report which is to be filed in court."

"Hmmm, I didn't know they were that important. Well, I am sure that is something Matilda can do for you. Let's just say I will talk to her and, by afternoon, we should know whether she can help. Is that fine with you?"

"Very nice. You see, today I will be very busy but I will try to call you even at night. Just try to have her do it for me, please."

"That will be taken care of. Now, tell me, what is this story about Toni that I hear?"

"What about him?"

"That you two have become such friends that the old boy has become jealous."

"I will tell you," Sembe laughed lightly. "Call me tonight. I really must run. Moreover, I left somebody waiting at your reception area."

"Is that he?" Ogutu asked, rising to escort her friend, but obviously keen to lay eyes on the suspected lover.

"No," Sembe said without hesitation. "It is Tim, my brother."

When the Juvenile Protection Officer's report was filed, a copy was passed to Amu by his lawyer. He was surprised that the author never contacted him. The report was all about Sembe. Very little was mentioned about him except that he was temperamental and spent too much time in bars. It cited his criminal case in Ndondosha Law courts and the proceedings prior to it with such alacrity that it was hard to ignore its partiality. What struck him dumb was the allegation that efforts to reach him had been fruitless, suggesting that he deliberately avoided the officer or wasn't interested in the matter anymore. He protested the contents of the report to his lawyer who promised to inform the judge about the inconsistencies but that was not to be. On the hearing date, little attention was paid to the objections his lawyer raised against the tendentious report. The judge made a short ruling, the gist of which gave custody of all the children to Sembe and awarded her interim maintenance for herself and the children to the sum of twenty thousand shillings monthly. The order was to take effect immediately. Amu was granted access to the children every weekend. He could take the children on Saturday and return them on Sunday if he so wished but this was to be to his cost.

Amu could live with the order for custody but the maintenance order infuriated him beyond measure. How could he pay her that much money when she was the one who was asking for the children in the first place? He vowed not to pay a single a cent to her, even before he left the court precinct. Mr Sarakasi was equally annoyed with the judge for making an order for maintenance without any legal basis. "Even in cases of *Alimony Pendente lite*, there has to be a basis for awarding a particular amount," the lawyer said. As he

explained to Amu, an order for maintenance should have been made after the court had ascertained the earnings of the parties and not arbitrarily as was the case here. Normally, the court would ask for affidavits of means or take *viva voce* evidence about the earnings and resources of the parties. He advised Amu that an appeal against this order ought to be made immediately. Amu concurred. Since it was Friday afternoon, nothing much could be done. They agreed to meet the following week.

On Saturday morning, Sembe came with a contingent of police from Kileleshwa Police Station. The court order that had given her custody of the children also directed Kileleshwa police to assist in the process. Amu was still in bed when they came. They knocked rudely at the door and, after Odongo opened it, there was a flurry of sound and activity, boxes banging on the floor, people shouting as the group went about collecting what remotely belonged to the children and their mother. It sounded as though the whole house was being evacuated. Amu quickly got out of bed and put on his clothes. He felt intense bitterness welling up in his stomach. "I will kill the bitch some day!" he muttered. He stood by the window of his bedroom and looked across the compound. There were five cars in all, including the police Mahindra. That morning, he decided to let Sembe do as she pleased. He strode to the bedroom door and opened it wide. He sat on the sofa and turned on the television set. Suddenly, there was a knock on his bedroom door and Sembe entered with two civilians and one policeman. She did not bother to greet him. She went straight to the dressing room and packed all her remaining clothes. She pointed to some things and the men carried them out one by one. When they finished, they left the same way they had come.

Odongo made breakfast for him after all the hullabaloo. He drank his tea in silence and then retired to the sofa. The morning had just begun yet unpleasant events were unravelling at a very fast pace. At the centre of his predicament, was Sembe. He hated her now more than he ever hated any human being. She had ruined his life completely. The thought that he would be paying her twenty thousand shillings every month just so that she could enjoy it with a boyfriend made him sick to his stomach. Now, he wished that he had maimed him that night or even killed him.

He thought of Beth, how cheaply she had sold his love and he began to feel deep hatred for her too. Thinking of Beth made him remember his son, Moses. It was shameful that, for nearly a year, he had not set eyes on him. Without the girls to worry about, this was probably the best time to go to Kisumu to see him and, perhaps, bring him to Nairobi. He knew that this might entail some negotiation with Beth. His plan was to ask politely at first but, if Beth became difficult, he would use whatever means necessary. Moses was one project he believed he could accomplish.

Suddenly, the phone rang. He picked it up and said, "Hello." It was Mr Sarakasi, the lawyer.

"Hello, Amu I never thought I would find you home."

"Well, I am home. Sembe was here a few hours ago with policemen to pick up the children."

"Oh, I see. Actually, it is about her that I am calling."

"Yes, what about her?"

"If you have a few moments, could you pass by my office today before lunch? We need to talk."

"Is it something very urgent?"

"Not exactly, but something we need to start working on immediately. Her lawyers have served me with new papers. I found them this morning when I came in."

"I will be at your office within an hour."

It was about a new case that Sembe had filed, the subject of which perplexed Amu. Sembe wanted the court to determine the extent of her interest in all properties acquired during their marriage. She alleged that she had contributed to the acquisition of the Kileleshwa property, his land in Kisumu on which Beth was living, the Kayole plot that his friend, Ruheni, had sold to him, the vast farmland in Lambwe Valley and the ten acres of sugar cane in Awendo. Apart from these, she claimed ownership of the Toyota, the refrigerator, the lounge suite, the electric as well as the gas stoves, the two computers and the stereo system. It was as though nothing was ever purchased without her making a monetary contribution. Her claim for the Kileleshwa house was fortified by the assertion that she had done all the decorating, refurnishing, remodelling and even rebuilding of the servants quarters. But, nothing was said about where the money had come from.

After breathing a huge sigh of exasperation, Amu had only one question for the lawyer. "Is she entitled to make such a claim?"

"Yes." The lawyer gave a vague smile settling his spectacles on the bridge of his nose with a nervous push of his fingers. "The whole concept is based English legislation from 1822 that our courts still apply. Under this legislation, the courts in England were obliged to make a finding on the extent to which property owned by couples was to be divided in the event of a judicial separation. When Kenya became independent, that legislation was adopted within the rubric of inherited laws commonly referred to as the statutes of general application. The courts in Kenya apply this law today."

Much of it did not make sense to Amu. With deep unease, he pressed his lips together, wiped his face and asked, "So, it means that she is perfectly entitled to make a claim on all the matrimonial property whether or not she paid for them?"

"The whole thing will depend on her contribution to the acquisition of the property. The contribution can be monetary or non-monetary. In some cases, the courts have held that the peace of mind that a housewife offers to her husband is contribution enough, which entitles her to some fraction of the property registered in the husband's name."

"In this case, she made no contribution at all. She was going to work just like me while sending all her money to her mother. I was taking care of all the household expenses and also buying the properties. The house in Kileleshwa has a mortgage on it and not even once has she made a payment. Now, how can she think of having a share of it? I cannot understand it."

"Well, how about other properties?"

"None of them. She didn't pay for any of them. In fact, I don't even know how she got to know about them. It is only you who have the details. Do you remember the documents that I brought in a bundle last time you were doing the affidavits on the custody matter?"

Amu remembered the little incident between the lawyer's clerk, Oracha and Ayugi. He was convinced that it was from there that information on his properties might have leaked to his adversaries. But, he wanted to be sure before he confronted Mr Sarakasi with this fact. Moreover, since he was getting frustrated with the lawyer anyway, he thought that no useful purpose would be served by flogging the issue, even though it was firmly ingrained in his mind.

"We are bound by confidentiality never to divulge information about our clients."

"I hope so, Mr Sarakasi. So, are you going to defend this outrageous claim? Surely you must see that all she is doing is trying to ruin me. She now has twenty thousand a month out of me and is scheming to get all my property. I want to know whether you will defend me and, this time, successfully?"

"I will defend you but I cannot guarantee one hundred percent success. Perhaps there are some concessions that we should be prepared to make here and there while we maintain our eyes on the big price."

"Concessions? Surely not on my property?" Amu protested.

Grimly silent, Amu sat through the next hour listening to Mr Sarakasi's gentle and persuasive explanation as to why settling the property dispute out of court would be more beneficial than fighting it all the way. When the lawyer finished, he asked his client to think about it. Amu took several deep breaths then he stood. Absolutely silent, he walked to the door.

When Amu walked out of Mr Sarakasi's office that afternoon, he was sure that he would never set foot there again. A disturbing sense of betrayal that had been building within him for some time now, had taken shape, making him doubt every word that came from the lawyer's mouth. The little incident with Oracha and Bidonge not only added to his frustration, but eroded even the little trust he could have had in the firm of *Waluballa Mosonik and Sarakasi Advocates*. He had struggled to make sense of that incident, at some point trying to pull his mind away from the treachery that it seemed to portend, but all in vain. And, with the lawyer's capricious scheme to offer part of his property to Sembe, Amu was convinced that Mr Sarakasi wasn't the lawyer for him.

Unable to overcome the feeling of depression that was overtaking him, he walked straight into The Closet. The bar was unusually crowded for that time of day. He pushed his way towards his favourite corner and saw the familiar faces of Osolo, Cosmas and Makoloo already at the table. They received him with a flattering amount of welcome and bonhomie. Although not exactly in the mood for merrymaking, one couldn't afford to stay aloof from this group. A round here and a round there, and the party was in full

swing. Makoloo left early to meet his new girlfriend, whom he said was coming from Zambia. But, knowing him, he was probably on his way to see Amina in Majengo. Left with two of his dearest friends, Amu narrated to them the misfortune that the divorce had brought. He told them about the custody order the day before and the maintenance of twenty thousand shillings. Osolo was amazed.

“But, how can you pay that kind of money to a woman who is probably earning more than you right now? I think something is wrong with our law and those who administer it.”

Then, he narrated his latest information about the property and how he had seen his lawyer’s clerk giving away information to his wife’s friends. They concluded that the lawyer wasn’t honest with him.

“The lawyer is selling you out to this woman. I know lawyers. They make money from both sides,” Osolo said.

“I don’t know. Mr Sarakasi seems an honest man and a serious professional but he just doesn’t seem to take my case seriously,” said Amu.

“I say you sack him and I will introduce you to another lawyer, my friend, who will fight tooth and nail for you.”

Cosmas who had been quiet all along asked whether it was wise to change lawyers at this stage of the proceedings.

“One is at liberty to change lawyers at any time and I believe that now is the time. That Sarakasi is probably too civil to play the game. Divorce, like politics, is a dirty game, brother. I will get you somebody who is sharp and who understands exactly the Kenya of today.”

“Does your friend specialise in divorce matters or is he an ambulance chaser?” Cosmas asked.

“He does everything. He is good, that I can assure you.”

The discussion put the matter to rest, at least for the moment. Amu decided that he was going to sack Mr Sarakasi and hire Osolo’s friend. There was a lot at stake and he couldn’t take any chances with a lawyer who seemed more interested in highlighting legal obstacles than assisting him to surmount those very obstacles. He arranged to meet Osolo on Monday so that they could pay a visit his lawyer friend.

The mood in the house was ecstatic. While the children were running up and down, unable to decide which rooms they would take, Sembe who was in the kitchen with her friend, Ogutu, couldn't help but smile. She knew that she would have the final say on who takes which room but, for the moment, felt no desire to intervene. Although Ayugi and Matilda were to arrive later with their children, and postpone such intervention, the joy of the occasion coupled by the feeling of triumph made it a lesser priority. As for Ogutu, the fact that she had assisted her friend in getting custody legitimised her early visitation and full involvement in the day's arrangements. Not only had she brought some *Dania*, carrots, green peppers and tomatoes, she had slaughtered the chicken and roasted it on the charcoal stove. Now, she was peeling potatoes while, at the same, time boiling rice. She would later use the rice to make *Pilau*. When the two other women arrived, the party was in full swing. Jeers and laughter could be heard as far as the gate.

Food was ready by two o'clock. The children were served first, so that they could let their mothers eat their lunch without interruptions. The oldest ones helped set the table while the maid ensured that everybody washed their hands. Given that they had drunk a lot of juices, they did not eat much. Soon they were out, playing again. At that time, their mothers were at the dining table enjoying their meal. They, too, seemed more interested in talking than eating and Sembe kept urging them on. "Ladies, please eat," she said. "Only I should be watching my weight because I am in the market again. But, I am still eating!"

"Who knows?" Ogutu replied. "Any of us may soon be in your shoes."

"Do you know that these days, because of AIDS, men prefer women with three or so children who have left their husbands?" Matilda remarked.

"So, we are still *Ndogo Ndogo*," Sembe quipped.

"I know I am and if Chad's father plays, I may just find myself a brand new man, he he heee," Ayugi said, drawing a loud laughter from the group.

The discussion went from relationships to food, property and *Bura*. When it was time to go, Sembe invited them to take some food with them. It was Ayugi who took food last. She was only

interested in some *Pilau* and a few *Mandazi*, for her husband. As she stuffed the food into a small plastic bowl, she asked her friend whether Wanja had been in contact.

"Yes, she called last week about the other case that she has prepared. But you know, Ayugi, I wanted to talk to you about that."

"Was that the property case?"

"Yes. I really don't know whether I want to go after Amu's things." Sembe paced as she talked, her demeanour reflecting a rather sullen disposition. "Look, God has been kind to me and now I have a house in my name and my children. I really don't want to have anything to do with that man or his things."

"That is where you are wrong, sister." Ayugi lowered her voice. "You see, now that you have taken the children from him, he feels helpless. He will probably sell the house and all the other things and leave his children with nothing. I bet you, he will get some prostitute to live with and spend his miserable life. The burden of looking after these children will fall squarely on you. I think it is wise to pursue at least some of the property for their sake. If you don't see it that way, then probably you are being selfish to your children. You don't want to secure for them what really belongs to them?"

"Wanja explained that to me and I told her that I approve. But, you know, my concern is that I don't want to appear bent on making Amu desolate."

"I understand your concern. You still have some feelings for him, don't you?"

Sembe huffed out a breath, looked at her friend and then to the mounds of food still on the table. "Well, he is the father of my children. It has nothing to do with whether I have feelings for him or not."

"Let me put it this way, then," Ayugi said, a serious look on her face. "I remember that you worked so hard to make that house in Kileleshwa beautiful. You did that so you and your children could live in a decent place. You knew the house belonged to the whole family. Why are you seeing it differently now? When did the house stop belonging to all of you including the children? Was it when you vacated it?" Ayugi looked deeply into Sembe's eyes. "All I am saying, friend, is that asking him not to sell the house, at least for

now, is not a bad thing and it is the right thing to do. Who knows? Your claim for the house may make him think differently of you and the children!”

“I don’t know, Ayugi.” Sembe shook her head. After a moment of contemplation, she said, “Wanja has already filed the case in court anyway. Let’s wait and see how the whole thing unfolds.”

Her submission was evident. It made Ayugi smile. “That’s better. I will see you later friend, but do me one little favour.”

Sembe looked at her friend askance, her head raised. “What’s that?”

“Just relax. Everything will be fine, just fine, believe me.”

Later, when her friends had gone, Sembe took her daughters to their respective bedrooms. Anna and Lisa were tired so they fell asleep immediately but Val was unusually edgy. She kept asking when her father would come home. Sembe, unsure of what to tell her, carried her back to her room.

“Daddy was bringing me toys and chocolate today. When is he coming home, Mummy?” she insisted.

“Daddy will not come today. He has gone on a safari.”

“No. He did not tell me that. When we left, he was still sleeping, remember?”

“Yes, he was still sleeping but he went on safari when he woke up.”

“So, he will bring me toys when he comes back?”

“Yes. But tomorrow I can get you some if you want.”

That satisfied her and, in fact, sent her to sleep. Sembe took her to her room and laid her on the bed. When she came back, she went straight to bed. She wanted to relax tonight and reflect on a future that included her children. But, a lingering thought of uncertainty seemed so persistent that, for a moment, she wasn’t sure that what she did this morning was the right thing. She knew that her children loved their father and that fact was more than evident in the brief encounter she had with Val. Ideally, that love should not be dependent on his relationship with their mother. However, only a fool would not envisage the difficulty abounding in any attempt to maintain the *status quo*. She felt sorry for her daughters but vowed to do the best she could to make their difficulties bearable.

Chapter Thirteen

IT WAS A crisp September mid-day with a blue sky and a dazzling sun. Inside the Dragon Star Restaurant on the second floor of the magnificent Mwenge building, John Kisa and his guest, Wanja Peters, were sitting at a small table in an alcove separated from the bar by a wooden screen. The cool air in the restaurant was refreshing, its scented atmosphere exhilarating; just the kind of surrounding that would fill any man or woman with a zest for living. They had made small talk about their days in Canada by the time the waiter came. They ordered salad, mushroom soup, lasagne and freshly squeezed passion juice. Then, Wanja asked why he did not meet her at the office and he replied that his intention was to feed her because she was so skinny. She knew he was joking because of the manner in which he twisted his face and rolled his eyes. Although that was exactly what he had said when he called her in the morning to invite her for lunch, it couldn't be any further from the truth. "Stop joking," she said, her voice ringing with amusement. "Since when did you become interested in my figure?"

"Seriously, my dear, you should be doing more lunches and dinners. It is healthy, you know! Moreover, who would like to keep a beautiful woman in the confines of an office?"

"So your intentions were not honourable, after all?" she asked.

When he did not respond immediately, she looked out of the sealed window. She had a good view of the adjoining open vegetable market, its car-filled parking lot and a crowd of street children scouring the stinking mounds of garbage littering one side of the perimeter. The destitution evident in their threadbare clothing and grimy frail frames caught her attention. When her family first came from Britain, she had difficulty understanding how human beings could survive such squalor. In Gatundu where her father grew up, she met many relatives who were poor. Most of them could hardly afford regular meals, let alone clothing. In contrast, her grandfather, the late Njoroge Mbuthia, had a big ranch, a fleet of lorries and

several buildings in Nairobi and Nyeri. He was a rich man by any standards and very contemptuous of poverty. In his opinion, poverty was the inevitable outcome of indolence. Perhaps, if he became the mayor of Nairobi, he would whip those filthy young lads into shape and give them something useful to do. As she gazed out of the window, she wondered whether a time would ever come when a woman could walk the streets of Nairobi without worrying about the safety of her purse, her wristwatch, or her jewellery being snatched by those young scoundrels.

“Not exactly in that sense!” he blurted as though aware of her straying concentration. “But, if you are asking whether being with you gives me pleasure, then my answer is in the affirmative.”

“What did you say?” she asked, the curiosity in her eyes leaping up avidly.

He turned his lustrous face towards the counter and said, “Never mind.”

“I was thinking of my grandfather,” Wanjia said, apologetically. “What about him?”

She drew a breath and said, “He is dead you know. I was in Canada when he died. He was the kindest and most lovable person in the world but he had this inner hatred for poverty and laziness. He fought in the *Mau Mau* you know. He was never a collaborator like some big names we hear of today. My grandfather believed that money comes to a person through hard work and that one cannot make money unless one knows how to enjoy the luxury that it brings. Very much unlike my father who never shows any emotion. Still, to this day, I believe that my father dislikes luxury, prefers austerity and is suspicious of possessions. Money has no personal appeal to him, though he is often tempted by the power it confers.”

She went on with no apparent realisation of the disconnection in her thoughts. “You wouldn’t think, would you, that a man of my father’s stature would be so indifferent to wealth? But that is how my father is. He has never had any aptitude for business and lacks the patience to learn. Now, with all the tax issues and the bank loans, my father’s thinking of selling the hotel. It just sickens me, you know. The other night, I even proposed to buy it from him. But just think of it—me buying my father out. Where would I raise the money? John, I am sorry about my blabbering. It is only that so much is going on in my family right now.”

“Is your family in financial trouble?”

“My father’s hotel has not been doing well. After those terrorists bombed the U.S. embassy, tourism has been very low. In fact, he had to adjust to suit local clientele. I know for a fact that they have *Githeri* on their menu now. On top of this, my father has been making very poor business decisions. Early in the year, he carved out a portion of the golf course and sold it to a developer who has put up some sub-standard houses adjacent to the property. It makes the whole place look unsafe to the guests. When I told him so, he remarked that he had no way of knowing ahead of time what the developer would do. He just has no business blood in him. The main problem is with the bank loans, which have accumulated so much interest. The property may soon be auctioned. I wish we could find a way of saving the property. So, yeah, my family is having some financial problems.”

“How about your uncles? Can’t they help?”

“You don’t understand our family. When my father inherited all the wealth from my grandfather, we became isolated. Other than parties, weddings and funerals, contact between us and them is very minimal. Sometimes, relatives may visit when they are in need of money or to ask father to assist in Harambee. That is all. But, even then, there is always latent hostility hidden beneath the facial affection. I am certain that the animosity will come to the surface one day.”

A slow and peculiar smile twisted her lips. “There is one aunt of mine,” she continued, “Auntie Georgina, she is a lawyer like myself. She works down in Industrial Area, for a company called East African Plastics. She is the only relative whom I could rely on in times of distress. She knows about my father’s financial situation and has helped a little bit. She is the only friend I have right now.”

“I am rather surprised to hear that, Miss Peters.”

“John, if I hadn’t known you for so long, I wouldn’t have told you this. I just feel that I can trust you. Lately, I have been running out of friends,” she said.

“You know that despite everything that took place between us in Canada, I still consider you to be a very close friend. For you, my door will always be open.”

“Really?” she said, feeling a little intimidated by his openness.

Despite the passage of time and the ups and downs of life, she still regarded him the same as when they were students in Canada. Then, he was mostly eccentric, a little introverted and dangerously pretentious. She had fallen for him notwithstanding but their relationship never saw the light of day. Partly, it was because of Katrina, the Danish girl who was neither beautiful nor any more chic than Wanja, but who seemed so very enthusiastic about being in close company of a black man from Africa. Wanja knew that the novelty would soon fade and the brother would be forced to come back to his lot. She had seen it happen to so many people. Black and white couples always ran into problems. In her reasoning, the affair between John and Katrina was bound to suffer the same fate. John never came back to her and she could not remember what happened to Katrina. Although she had never communicated her desires to him, she still held him accountable for her unhappiness. Now, she was looking at the same person, trying to figure out whether she was still attracted to him or merely fascinated by the wheel of fortune.

“Yes,” John said.

“I never thought so, John. I never thought you cared that much, given our history.”

“I do care,” he said, his deep and masculine voice sounding very seductive.

He put his left palm over hers and the warmth radiated from that point to her entire body. Why did she always feel so defenceless against this man, she wondered. Was it his looks or just the charm that was irresistible? From what she heard, John had a very good business, a fat bank account and very close ties to his ancestral home, Uganda. She knew he was married and this fact couldn’t be ignored, considering how she felt about her parents’ separation. All this made her ponder whether she was ready to be a two-time loser. What was she going to do with this man, especially now that the opponent would be Ayugi and not Katrina whom time had taken care of without her lifting a finger?

John wasn’t quite sure of the direction of the talk but was, nevertheless, pleased that she had set the tone for discussing the issue he had in mind. She was vulnerable in the face of any deal

that would generate some money. Since he first met her, he never doubted her professionalism or her belief in fairness, justice, human rights and all those “nonsense” of the modern world. But right now, before his own eyes, a different Wanja was unfolding; one tormented by the risk of a financial meltdown. He knew this to be his moment.

On his assurance, Wanja appeared much relieved. She sat with her head tilted back, her eyes searching distantly for something, and her chest pointing to the ceiling. A mild cough to clear her throat shook her breasts which seemed to rise with every movement, like wheat bread beginning to take the heat of the oven. It was a moment of sensuous revelation but he felt a little numbed by her contemplative mood. She was an attractive woman, he thought, with a well-rounded figure, smooth complexion and a general air of vitality and good health. This aside, there was business to be taken care of and time was money. Still, something had to be said about her beauty to remind her that he too, was aware that work without play makes Jack a dull boy. He raised his head, threw her an affectionate but mischievous glance and said “Miss Peters, you are a very beautiful woman.” He had no doubt that it had an effect on her. What he wasn’t sure about was how she would react. His intention was to elicit some relaxation but if it went further than that, so be it.

She gave him a rather strange look. When she spoke, her voice gained spontaneity. “Now, you did not invite me here to tell me how beautiful I am. If I didn’t know you better, John, I would have thought that you are trying to seduce me but no, not you. You have something else in mind and my instincts tell me that it has to do with a client of mine. Tell me John, am I am right or wrong?”

“You are right,” he admitted. “We both know that I had my chances but I squandered them. I must admit that the memory pains me sometimes but that is all that they are—just memories. You are also right, that I wanted to discuss a matter concerning a client of yours. As a matter of fact, it’s about Sembe. Last night, my wife went to see her and she conveyed her greetings. She is also very pleased with the services that she is getting and, for this I must thank you. At least, you didn’t let me down.”

“Thank you for both compliments.”

“She also had concerns about the property case and was wondering how best we could protect her interest. Let me explain. You told her that she might be entitled to half the interest in the property. My understanding is that if the court so orders, then it will be incumbent upon her husband either to sell the property and share the money with her, or look for money and purchase her interest. You know it is a very big house so finding a buyer may take some time. Secondly, Sembe really needs the money immediately to redo the house that she has recently bought. I was wondering whether we could make some arrangements whereby instead of selling the house to a stranger, we agree to a reasonable purchase price. A company that I know of can raise the money without delay. Later, when everything is quiet, the property can be sold at market value, the company recovers its share and the rest of the money is given to Sembe.”

“Is that what she wants?”

“Yes. You know Sembe is a very proud woman. If you talk to her about it today, she might deny it. You probably know her better than I do.”

“Oh, yes, she is never sure of what she wants.”

“I think we need to help her.”

“I have a professional responsibility. It may be unprofessional to do this. I will have to check...”

“I hope you don’t want go asking other lawyers about this. Moreover, I have a plan to compensate you very handsomely if you help my friend out.”

“Of course, not. Actually, I was just thinking of going over the rules of professional conduct once again.”

The waiter came with their food and they ate in silence. Wanjia did not seem taunted by his suggestion. In a subtle way, she was giving encouragement to his plans, but with no indication of how to proceed. Lawyers are always careful not to commit themselves, he thought.

“How do you propose whatever you are suggesting be done?”

“First, we get an evaluator who has our ears to put a value to the property. Then, from the figure he gives us, we fix the price—lower than he says, of course. We pay off whatever is due on the mortgage, rents and rates, and stamp duty. After that, we pay off the parties

and boom, the property is divested into our hands. At that time, we register the property. I pay your fees or whatever we agree to then the rest is between Sembe and me. Very easy.”

“At this moment, we don’t know what the court will say. Are we not placing the cart before the horse?”

“I know what the court will say because it is you, Wanjia Peters, who is Sembe’s advocate. I know you have connections and the charm to pull this off.”

“But, John, legal proceedings are very unpredictable.”

“Look, sweetheart, just relax, okay—just relax. I know you have a lot of things on your mind right now. I will not demand that you make up your mind today. Just promise me that you will think about it. That is all I need.”

“Of course, I will think about it, John.”

That Monday afternoon, Amu and Osolo met outside Kenya Cinema. Osolo’s lawyer friend had an office in Baraka House on Tom Street. The large building had no elevator so they went up three flights of stairs on foot to get to the fourth floor. A long corridor brought them to a door on the far eastern end of the building. Mr Otieno Kambero’s office was a small cubicle, probably ten by twelve feet, sandwiched between a wall and a copy bureau. Two or three filing cabinets lined one side of the wall while a Kenya Airways calendar and a framed copy of his degree certificate hung on the other. His desk stood in the centre with two guest chairs in front of it. The office was simple, compared to Mr Sarakasi’s, a good indication that he was predisposed to demand little cash for his services.

They found Mr Kambero brooding over a pile of papers. He was a short man with a round face. He was probably in his early thirties, although the brown Kicomi suit, the saggy white shirt and the cotton necktie made him look much older. When he smiled at them, his mouth opened to reveal a forest of disproportionately large brown teeth sticking out of his gums like acupuncture needles. He had a warm personality that seemed a little exaggerated considering the fact that he probably wasn’t attracting much in terms of legal fees. Amu got the impression that he was a man upon whom the outer world did not impinge and he was content to be so.

Like most *Luo* professionals with whom Amu had dealt before, he seemed quite learned in his trade. With regard to Amu's case, he had little to say except that he would need to see the file first. He drafted a letter to Mr Sarakasi, asking for the same and boldly stating that he had been instructed to take over the matter. The draft was quickly taken by his messenger to a typing and copy bureau next door. It appeared that the office had no secretary or typist. Amu paid him five hundred shillings for opening a file. Part of this money was used to pay for the typing charges. Thereafter, they chatted freely about many things. Amu came to know that Mr Kambero was from Alego but his grandparents had migrated to Lambwe Valley in Homa Bay district many years ago. Since he, too, had bought land in Lambwe, they found a lot in common. Although Kambero appeared to be pleasant and well-informed on many things, Amu wasn't certain that his establishment would be well-suited to deal with a case of such magnitude. He, nevertheless, decided to give it a try.

Not much occurred in the weeks that followed. The transfer of the file from Sarakasi to Kambero took ages. Mr Sarakasi demanded to be paid in full before the file could leave his office. Since Amu had no money to pay right away, he had to ask for a co-operative loan which also took some time to process. In the meantime, and true to the remarks of Osolo, Mr Kambero had secured copies of the proceedings from the court records and even filed his notices of appointment. When the file finally came, Mr Kambero quickly moved the court to have the orders for custody and maintenance reviewed. The law requires that such application be placed before the same judge. Justice Memar Kundubhai was less appreciative of Mr Kambero's antics and rejected both applications. Mr Kambero then sought interim orders of stay, which the judge also rejected. With all the avenues closed at the high court level, Mr Kambero sought Amu's opinion about whether they should go to the Court of Appeal. Obviously, such a move would require money, a lot of it, since Mr Kambero would need an experienced litigation lawyer to lead him at the hearing. Amu was slow in making up his mind and the notice period of thirty days expired before any papers were filed.

Chapter Fourteen

AFTER AMU RELEASED Odongo and Salama, the absurdity of living in the big house alone became all too glaring, not to mention the lingering feeling of guilt and failure that abounded therein. Every night was a nightmare; his having to wander the desolate rooms of the house and be constantly reminded of how good things used to be. The children's bedrooms especially, stripped of their curtains and linens immortalised the depth of his quandary. Sometimes, he would slip into the study on the upper floor, intent on reading or merely typing something on the computer, but the images of his daughter, Val, sitting on his lap or Anna demanding to be helped with her homework, flooded his senses, making him all the more miserable. Then, he would stomp to the balcony, gaze at the dazzling constellations stalking the night skies and inhale the pure and scented air from the trees that towered over the vast compound. These, too, would bring fantasy and amorphous desires which, in a brief span of time, hopelessly turned into fear and anxiety. When it all became unbearable, he would saunter to his bedroom, drink whiskey and then bury himself in a heap of bed sheets, hoping to wake up just in time to get out of the house the next day.

The loneliness in his life had become a monster, an egregious serpent that sucked all the happiness out of him, leaving him limp and desperate. At work, the torment was masked by the interminable repair calls, staff complaints and report writing. Still, the desperation lurked stealthily somewhere in his mind, creating an imbalance in thoughts and actions that were only visible to avid eyes. But the days, frustrating as they were, afforded some modicum of vivacity and escape from his inner turmoil. On occasion, a smile would escape from his face or even laughter but these would be intermittent and inordinately rare. Nothing increased his agitation more than the inexorable onset of dusk—its furore and rush, heralding ghostly

darkness and the inviolable routine of confinement to the ample yet desolate ménage. He came to believe that his tribulations could be ameliorated to some significant degree if he avoided going back to Kileleshwa in the evenings. What he needed was a smaller place, a one or two bedroom apartment to live in.

He set about the task of finding an apartment, believing it to be easy. Every morning, he gathered the three daily newspapers and scoured their classified sections for a small rental apartment west of Gojo Road. But his search, limited both in scope and means, did not solicit any results until the end of October. Actually, it was through Auntie Didi that he was able to secure a small one bedroom apartment near Hurlingham Shopping Centre. But, before he moved there, he made arrangements to let the Kileleshwa house. He mentioned this fact to a few friends and workmates and, within days, he got several takers. He settled on one—an official of a foreign embassy. When the man and his wife first saw the house in October, they were impressed so they speeded up the process of preparing and executing the lease. This put more pressure on him to vacate. A week before he moved out, the tenant had already brought some of his things to the house. The rent was a handsome sixty-five thousand shillings a month, payable at quarterly intervals. Upon agreement, he also sold most of the household items to the tenant. These were the exquisite wall pictures, carpets, one pair of sofas and a coffee table. Other smaller items were given to the tenant free of charge. The five-year lease was drawn up and filed at the lands registry by Mr Kambero.

The whole process of moving into the flat and negotiating the lease had taken his mind off the divorce. But, after a few weeks, his mind began to focus more on his future. One thing that loomed prominently amongst all his thinking was Moses, his son. He decided that the time had come for him to go to Kisumu and claim his rights as a father. The urgency of such an undertaking was predicated upon his fear that unless he took tangible steps to involve himself in the life of the boy, there might never be another chance. The opportunity would be lost forever. Well aware that the quality of his fatherly involvement might be enhanced if there were some co-operation from the mother, Amu wondered how far Beth would be willing to go in terms of assisting him to normalise his relationship

with his son. If marriage were to be her bargaining chip, then the situation would be very complicated. He wasn't sure he was ready to marry Beth at that very moment although he would never want to appear blunt and insensitive. The affair between them had hit its highest mark long before it melted like an ice cream bar left in the scorching sun. He was in no mood to attempt its repair, especially in view of the excruciating financial circumstances that the divorce was inflicting on him. Yet, he knew just how tightly Beth held the key to Moses. All these issues couldn't be resolved unless he went to Kisumu and had a face-to-face talk with Beth.

Amu decided to use the Christmas vacation for this purpose. He called his cousin, Domnicus Onjala, who was working with the Lake Management and Development Authority (LMDA) in Kisumu and asked him to locate Beth. Onjala did so with ease. Beth was a programme officer at Evergreen International, an international NGO involved in an afforestation programme in Mirui area. Onjala also found out that she was living on Kibos Road and was very close to some senior civil servant. Onjala did not know whether he was her boyfriend or not. Amu was displeased by this fact. Having a man on the scene was likely to complicate matters. He wondered what it was with women that made them so averse to independence. Beth had hardly been in Kisumu for two years and was already involved with a man! What did she lack that made her run into the arms of a man so soon, more so a civil servant? Or could this have been part of the deal brokered by Auntie Didi? Good sense prevented him from getting too emotional about these issues. Beth, after all, was a grown woman and, therefore, entitled to her choices.

His trip to Kisumu was delayed until after the new year because of the developments in the office. Mr Gronengen, the General Manager, was leaving the company. His contract was expiring at the end of the year and the company had already indicated its unwillingness to renew it. Not that he wanted to stay. As a matter of fact, he had become very critical of Georgina Wamugunda, the new Managing Director, and had mentioned a number of times that he was ready to go back to Germany. Now, his time was up and he seemed quite upbeat about making plans for his departure. He decided to take his annual leave in January and never come back. Georgina appointed Amu as the acting General Manager until a

suitable replacement was found. This meant that he was responsible for the handing over which was scheduled for December. Because of this added responsibility, he was prevailed upon by Georgina to relinquish leadership of the quality committee, something that he held dear. But the excitement of moving to the third floor overshadowed the little concerns he had about being taken off the quality committee. Indeed, the acting position came with more power and influence and, for a moment, Amu thought that Georgina was subtly abetting his rise in the echelons of power.

It wasn't until mid-January that he could take a week's vacation to attend to his personal matters. He decided to drive to Kisumu then. He arrived on a hot Thursday afternoon and sought Domnicus Onjala from his LMDA office on Oginga Odinga Street. His cousin was relaxed in a small room on the fifth floor of an ageing office building. Together, they hurriedly left the office and descended upon a restaurant on the ground floor of the same building for a snack and to plan their next move. Onjala had the casual, relaxed air of a man not exactly bothered by the turmoil around him. His loose white shirt and khaki trousers reflected this attitude. Amu, on the other hand, was more taciturn. Without much ado, he narrated to his cousin the story of his divorce, how Sembe had run away from the matrimonial home and had taken him to court. He told his cousin, too, that Sembe had obtained custody of the children and was now attempting to take the house as well, all these at the behest of her new boyfriend.

Onjala had heard the story many times before from relatives working in Nairobi. But a story removed from the actors can hardly portray the unrelenting passion and intuition that inspire events as they unfold. The pain with which Amu told the story ignited in him a spasm of inquietude towards spousal separation, making his bones crunch with hatred. Incidentally, Onjala was among those who did not like Sembe very much. On one occasion, Onjala had convinced Amu that there was money to be made in fishing boats and nets. The two had agreed to form a company through which they would invest in the fishing business. Sembe was opposed to the idea. She influenced Amu to withdraw from the deal but Amu still went ahead and lent Onjala some money so that he could implement the idea. However, Onjala had a heavy burden of school fees at the time so

the money ended up being used for that purpose. Onjala never repaid Amu, a matter that Sembe constantly reminded him about. Thus, Onjala kept off Sembe's path. Whenever he was in Nairobi, he would see his cousin in the office and stay the night in Andora with Kizito, or in Ndola with Nyabari.

A light lunch and a few drinks set them towards Milimani in search of Evergreen International. Its offices were within a five minute drive from the town centre. A huge signboard introduced them to a compound, surrounded by a tall eucalyptus fence, punctuated only by a green and white metal gate. Two security guards opened the gate and, immediately, they were exposed to a huge white building, a beautifully manicured lawn, a horde of four-wheel-drive vehicles parked in a lot to the left of the building. A paved walkway led to the entrance of the building and branched towards a green house on the right. The guards gave them a small sticker that was to be placed on the windscreen and two visitors' name tags that they were advised to wear at all times while on the premises. They parked the Volvo in the visitors' lot and walked to the reception area. Fortunately, they found Beth talking to the receptionist. She walked them to an empty room and invited them to sit.

"How are you, Beth? Long time no see?" Amu said after he sat down.

"I am doing all right. How is Nairobi?" she said, briskly hunching her shoulders.

"Fine, I guess. This is my cousin, Domnicus Onjala. Dom, this is Beth," Amu said, patting his cousin on the back.

"Nice to meet you, Beth."

"Welcome," Beth responded, not quite interested in the introduction. "I heard you and Sembe are now officially divorced?" she asked, turning to Amu.

"Yes."

"What a shame. You know, I thought she really loved you. Oh, Amu, this and Oh, Amu, that. The woman was such a bore. You know that she once wrote a letter to me?"

"A letter? What for?" Amu asked, obviously surprised.

"You didn't know? She said that both of you wanted Moses to be brought to Nairobi."

"No, I have never talked to her about Moses."

"Perhaps she wanted to bewitch my son, which is why I never replied."

"I didn't know you two girls were getting along so well?"

"Me getting along with that witch? No way."

"Anyway, the reason I am here is to talk to you about Moses."

"I told you before, there is nothing to talk about Moses. I told you this even before he was born. So, please, let's just not talk about him."

"But, I am his father!"

"No, you gave up your right as a father a long time ago, Amu. Don't remind me of the past. Now, I am married and I don't want problems."

"You are married? So who is the lucky man?"

"If you must know, his name is Khasiani."

"Is he a brother to Robert Khasiani, the District Commissioner?"

"His name is Robert Khasiani."

The marriage part was unknown even to Onjala. The District Commissioner was a well known figure. There were rumours that some day, he might rise to become the Provincial Commissioner since he was close to the President. If he was married to Beth as was being claimed, then it was his second marriage because the District Commissioner's wife was the chairperson of the women development team in the province, and a well-known figure. The bewilderment on Amu's face did not escape Beth's attention.

"In case you are wondering, I am his second wife," Beth said. "Moses now has a father. He does not need you, neither do I."

Still, Amu had no way of knowing whether Beth was telling the truth but he couldn't risk finding out. "I will take you to court for this, Beth," he threatened. "You know I will."

"Well, you can do whatever you want. As for the courts, I hear you are not very good at those. Even your girls were given to their mother. Don't threaten me with courts."

"I want my land, too."

"Which land?"

"Don't play dumb with me. The one I bought in Kibos."

"What do you mean? That is my land. It is registered in my name. Look, Amu, please go away before we have problems because it is you who will suffer. If you have any claims or you think that I have anything of yours, please go to court and never step inside this office again."

“I will certainly go to court, Beth. You take my son and my land and you think you can throw me out just like that? Forget it, sister. You and I will fight it out. I don’t care whether you sleep with the Provincial Commissioner or the president. My son is my son and my land is my land!”

The remark about sleeping with the Provincial Commissioner irked Beth so much that she stood up, stepped back and threw her hands into the air. “Get out, you filthy bastard. Get out of my office or I will call the police for you!” she shouted.

When they remained transfixed in their seats, she shouted some more; her tongue sharper than a serpent’s tooth. Her animosity was unbelievable. Her sudden outbursts drained the atmosphere of gaiety and set upon them melancholy and confusion, all in a synchronised sequence that made it look as though Beth had intended it to be that way. Without risking embarrassment, Amu and Onjala left. After being ejected from the building by an irate woman, Amu walked silently to his car. Onjala who, all along, had regarded the whole encounter thoughtfully and without much enthusiasm, tagged along wishing that he could be somewhere else. They were met at the parking lot by a security guard who asked them to surrender their visitors’ tags.

As they drove back to Onjala’s office, Amu’s mind was preoccupied. He had failed to make any inroads in his pursuit of parental rights. The outcome of the encounter with the woman who had once been his lover was disastrous. Her attitude, sanctimonious and condescending, had scuppered any prospect of having a meaningful discussion with her. Further, it confirmed his worst fears—he would probably not see his son for a long time unless he did something. He made a decision to hang around Kisumu for a whole week, if necessary, so that he could attempt to see his son. He was going to book himself into a guest house in Kondele and then make his moves. He reasoned that, since a project of this nature could very well provoke the ire of some important people in town, he needed some kind of protection perhaps from the courts or simply a lawyer. He was going to call Mr Kambero later in the day to ask him to recommend a lawyer in Kisumu who could protect him or assist him in the getting a court order, should it be necessary.

Amu dropped off Onjala at the LMDA offices on Oginga Odinga Road. They agreed to have dinner at Onjala's house in Pand Pieri Estate later in the evening. Left to himself, Amu drove back into town and headed east on Kakamega Road. At Kondele, he turned right on Kibos Road and drove for about two kilometres before turning right again into the parking lot of Ogonyore Guest House. At the reception desk, a female attendant informed him that there were vacant rooms. Amu quickly paid for one on the second floor and was given a key. He did not care to inspect it first. All he needed to know was whether the room had a mosquito net and hot water. When she confirmed their availability, he hurriedly went back to the car, retrieved his bag which he swung over his back and pulled out his briefcase from the back seat. In minutes, he was in the shower, cleaning off the dust and sweat and getting ready for the battle ahead. When he climbed out of the shower, he padded barefoot over the cement floor and grabbed a pair of towels that were on the bed. They were dry and wrinkled and had a rancid smell that almost choked him. He threw them down then removed his own from his bag and dried himself. Feeling apprehensive and, at the same time, exhilarated and eager, he changed into fresh clothes. He was ready...ready to confront the world.

There was no telephone in the room, so he walked to the reception desk and asked the female attendant if he could use the one in the office to make a long-distance call. She agreed but for a flat charge of one hundred shillings. Fortunately, he found Mr Kambero who gave him the name of a lawyer in Kisumu. Using the same phone, he called the Kisumu lawyer but found that he had gone to the High Court in Kisii. He made an appointment for the next morning. Back in his room, he turned on the fan and lay on the bed for a short afternoon nap. Now that he had set his schedule for the next day, he could relax for a while and then join the Onjals for dinner. For some reason, he was looking forward to seeing Beldina, Onjala's wife, and their children. He drifted off, staring at the hypnotic swing of the ceiling fan until, finally, he fell asleep.

The whole family was waiting for him when he arrived. Onjala and Gundo, his elder son, were in the living room, watching television. Beldina and her last born daughter were in the kitchen while the rest of their children were in the inner rooms doing their

homework. Beldina was particularly happy, “*Ei Semeji* you have remembered us,” she said, extending her arm to greet him. “How nice of you!”

“I have come,” he responded. “How are you and the children doing?”

“We are fine. God has kept us,” she said, while seated on a stool near the door.

“How was your trip from Nairobi, *Buore*?”

“Good.”

“Praise be to God.”

At that point, the child in the kitchen was heard calling her mother, “Mama Mama!”

“What is it, *Dani Nyo Okello*?” Beldina shouted back, addressing the child by her nickname.

“Mama, just come!” the child insisted.

“*Semeji*, excuse me. Let me see what this child is calling me for,” Beldina said, rushing to the kitchen.

As she was walking to the kitchen, somebody knocked on the door. Gundo went to the door and came back. Whomever it was, asked to speak to his father. Onjala went outside and Amu could hear him talking to two or so people. Within a space of ten minutes, Onjala came back. He told Amu that the men outside were policemen and they had been sent to arrest him for being a security risk.

“Security risk...what do they mean, security risk?” he asked in utter disbelief. He knew then that it was somehow connected to Beth. Suddenly, he was furious with her. He went outside to find out what offence he had committed but the policemen would not let him talk. Immediately, they placed handcuffs on him and pushed him into the police car. Onjala begged them at least to explain to him what was going on. When they would not relent, he asked whether there were anything he could do assist his cousin. The man who looked like their boss asked Onjala to speak to him apart from the rest.

“You see, *Jatelo*, we are only obeying orders. However, I don’t know how far you and your friend are willing to co-operate with us?”

“What do you mean, Sir?” Onjala asked, still mesmerised by the events.

“Well, would your friend be willing to leave town tonight at this very minute and go back to the hole where he came from?”

“Why, Sir?”

“What do you mean, why?” the policeman responded curtly. “Because my boss and the rest of the security team have information that he is a security risk and if he doesn’t leave, then we will definitely give him a place to sleep tonight and even for a few days until you arrange bail. What do you say? Remember, we have no time to waste.”

Onjala thought about it for a minute. Leaving Kisumu was certainly better than going to jail. The way he saw it, there was no choice in the matter. He cleared his throat and said to the policeman, “But can you at least let him eat? His *Semeji* was preparing something for him?”

“That depends on how willing you are to co-operate with us.”

“I said yes.”

“Okay, go back to the house and bring me two thousand shillings,” the policeman said. Then, to his colleagues he ordered, “Belgut, *wacha Mabusu aingie ndani kuchukua vitu vyake*” (let the prisoner take his things).

Amu was released but was visibly shaken. He gave the policemen the two thousand shillings they had asked for and agreed to leave town. The policemen drove off but not without a stern warning that if he tried any tricks, he would end up in jail. Beldina had to concoct little trimmings here and there to give to her *Semeji* since the dishes were still being prepared. Amu hurriedly ate whatever she brought and then stood up to leave. Onjala said short prayers and led his cousin to his car. Both of them were well aware of the perils of ignoring the warning. The Provincial Administration had a penchant for displaying its unwieldy power on persons with no political connections. After he said goodbye to his cousin, Amu went back to the guest house, packed his things and left. This wasn’t before the female attendant informed him that the police had been around, asking for him.

The following Monday, he dutifully went back to work. On his desk, was a letter from Mr Kambero, reminding him of the maintenance money due to Sembe. Copies of threatening letters from Sembe’s lawyer were attached. He quickly scanned them and

then called Mr Kambero. The lawyer wasn't in his office, but a manly voice promised to pass the message to him when he came in. Amu reverted to his normal office routine, taking time to diligently perform the tasks designated for the General Manager before attending to the production department. The higher office came with an unbelievable amount of work and decision making. He was beginning to enjoy it when he remembered that, in the morning, Sally had alerted him to the advertisement for the position of the General Manager that had appeared in the *Mail*. This unsettled him. How could the company advertise the position externally when earlier indications were that it would be filled in-house? There was only one way to find out. He called Georgina's office and asked the secretary whether her boss was in. He had intended to make an appointment but when the woman said that he could go in and talk to the boss, he was ecstatic. He found Georgina on the phone. She motioned him to sit down.

"What can I do for you, sir?" she asked, after replacing the receiver.

"Well, I came by to talk to you about the position in which I am currently acting. I understand that you have advertised it."

"Yes, the Board insisted that it should be filled immediately. We have commissioned a recruiting agency to begin looking for someone immediately. Why are you asking? Are you interested in it?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then you will need to apply immediately. I am sure that the agency will look at you favourably since you have been here. You know, if it were up to me, I could very well confirm you in that position. I hope you understand this."

"Yes, I do."

"Then, good luck!"

Amu left Georgina's office with some trepidation. He knew that the woman did not favour him for the position. Nothing would have been easier than asking the Board to simply confirm him. Even if he applied, chances were that he would never be given the position. A wise captain should know when to steer his boat back to land. He decided not to pursue the matter. What distressed him more was that he was no longer on the quality team. After he assumed the acting position, Georgina took immediate steps to establish a

quality department. She facilitated the appointment of Njoka, a young University graduate rumoured to be related to her, as the new Quality Manager. Thereafter, a quality engineer was hired and some staff from production were transferred to work as quality associates. The entire maintenance staff were also moved from production and constituted into a department. Kinuthia was retained as the head foreman while a new maintenance manager was hired. The company then reorganised the management structure to accommodate the new set up. This reorganisation constricted Amu's authority over persons and resources. He was left as the production manager, basically in charge of the few employees working the production shifts, mould setting, tool changeover, parts packaging, warehousing and arranging work schedules.

With a feeling of disgrace for failing to get a higher position shrouding his conscience and legal problems pulling at his strings, Amu went about his work mechanically, taking each day at a time and making no tangible plans for the future. He got through the days by concentrating on his work but, in the evenings there were no distractions. He dreaded going back to his empty apartment so, after work, he would spend some time at The Closet and then find his way home late at night. At home, he would brood over the empty kitchen, perhaps fix a quick omelette and then jump into the shower. Later, he would lie in bed, his thoughts wandering aimlessly about the future until he fell asleep. Each morning, he would get up burning with hatred and the desire for revenge but, finding no way to vent the anger at home, he would carry it to work. No wonder he became the rancorous despot of the production department.

During this period, the court battles continued unabated. In February, Sembe obtained a court injunction to stop him from selling or, in any way, interfering with the properties, including the Kileleshwa house, until her property suit was heard. Apparently, her action was prompted by information that he was no longer living in the house. She might have thought that he had sold the house. When the application came before the court for an *inter partes* hearing, he was present with Mr Kambero. The lawyer argued brilliantly that

Sembe's application had no merit since his client had no intention of disposing of the property anyway. He informed the court that Sembe wasn't the registered owner of the property so she had no sufficient interest to warrant her obtaining the orders that were sought. Sembe's lawyer opposed this argument on the same grounds. It was precisely for the reason that she wasn't a registered owner of the property that she risked losing her interests in the same property, the lawyer argued. In the end, the judge confirmed his earlier judgment. A permanent injunction was issued, restraining Amu from disposing of the property, or in any way, interfering with its title until the main suit was finalised. The judge also ordered that all the rents from the properties be deposited in court until the case was heard and the final orders made.

Chapter Fifteen

SEMBE MOVED THE chair rather carefully so as not to break its remaining arm. It was part of the furniture that was brought from Mamboleo. Like every other item brought from there, the moving had taken its toll, first on the paint and then on its arms and legs. Still, the furniture had to endure being moved from one part of the house to another, sometimes through the gentle arms of an adult but frequently through the rough, constant and playful push and pull of children. Eventually, she would have to buy new ones, she thought, but, until then, she had little choice. Now, she wanted to catch a little sun before its scorching heat engulfed the earth. The children, Anna and Val, were playing near the fence, overlooking a small shamba where the former occupant of the house had grown maize and potatoes. She placed the chair against the wall then went back to the house to get a cup of tea and a newspaper.

When she came back, she set the cup on the floor, the newspaper on her lap and closed her eyes. The heat of the morning sun gently massaged her skin, evoking a lubricious feeling of inner warmth and cuddliness. Instead of surrendering to the pleasure, her mind raced through the events of the past few months. In particular, she marvelled at how she had changed her status to that of a single parent in such a short span of time. Although there was a financial sacrifice for this undertaking, it had obvious benefits. Finding happiness in the company of her family, or part of it as was the case now, was very fulfilling. Although she needed money, she wasn't sure that squeezing resources out of her husband was the best way to improve her financial situation. Now, the lawyer was even threatening to garnishee his salary, auction some of his property and even commit him to civil jail. The thought that Amu could be put in jail for failing to obey an order for alimony amused her. She was almost laughing when she noticed Tim and Vivian Nyambura, his wife, coming out of the house. The two had visited since the night before.

“Good morning, *Waya*,” his wife said in heavily accented *Luo*. Sembe, awakened from her contemplative mood, answered, “Hey, good morning folks. Why awake so early? Going somewhere?”

“Oh, no,” they responded in unison.

“There is breakfast on the table.”

“We have been that way already!” Tim remarked.

“How was the night?”

“Beautiful. We slept very well,” Tim intoned.

“When you come next time, I will have a bed in that room so that you don’t have to put the mattress on the floor.”

Vivian Nyambura stood next to her husband, listening silently. She glanced at Sembe blithely and, when their eyes met, she smiled. She wasn’t particularly adorable, but Sembe liked her. Her disproportionate features, amplified by her short legs and a flat rear, stood out just as much as the thick lips and brown teeth. As far as Sembe was concerned, Vivian Nyambura could have been any woman and, still, she would regard her in the same way—as her brother’s wife.

Tim moved closer to his sister and said, “Sem, your house is big and appealing. Are you sure you want to live here alone.... I mean without a roommate or somebody like that?”

“I have thought about that, Tim but, for the moment, I just want to repair it. You know, I have three children and when Lisa is back from school, the house is usually full. It is tough for me financially but what can I do? You know, since Baba Lisa abandoned us, we have to go about life the hard way.” She stretched herself on the chair and relapsed into her usually anxious and sullen persona. Her visitors could tell the pain with which the last sentence was uttered. Nobody said a word.

Tim was sorry to have brought up the subject. His sister’s divorce was a big issue in the family. Apparently, his parents did not approve of their daughter breaking up with her husband, snatching the children from him and then living alone. According to *Luo* custom, divorce was something of a taboo and it cast a bad omen on the rest of the female members of the family. She wasn’t the first girl but, still, the problems in her marriage could affect her younger sister. This is why his parents together with Okola, their elder brother, had ganged up against her. They blamed her squarely for breaking up her marriage. Their father even threatened to

excommunicate her from the family when she filed the case in court. His opinion was that the matter should be settled by him and the elders from Amu's side. Their mother was distraught but reacted with calm indifference. When she came to Nairobi, she reiterated the old man's position and asked Sembe to be patient with *Jaloka*. She, too, was totally against the pursuit of custody and divorce through the courts.

But, Tim thought differently. He had no qualms about a woman choosing to live by herself if she so desired. No wonder he was the only one who had defied the family's united front against Sembe. This created a deep rift between him and Okola thus he preferred to visit at Sembe's rather than Okola's in Kambilamoshi. Tim's position was influenced by his circumstances. His marriage to Vivian Nyambura, a *Kikuyu* woman from Nyeri, made him a kind of pariah in the family. He should have known better than to take Vivian Nyambura to the village on the same day that he sought his parents' approval of the marriage. The family meeting called to discuss the Vivian Nyambura issue ended in disarray, with his father swearing not to have an *Okuyu* in his home and Tim declaring that he would never set foot in that home again. "I will forget that I ever had a son called Timotheo Rawinji," his father had cursed.

Endeared to Sembe from the days of his youth, Tim had no real friend except his sister. This was due to his cantankerous temperament and what some thought to be his poor sense of judgement. He refused to go to college after completing his "O" levels and was in and out of jobs. So, he lived off his sister's generosity. Whenever he was broke, she gave him money. He had even spent nights at the "Box" whenever he was thrown out of his Huruma flat. On such occasions, Sembe would leave her bed for him and share with Ayugi. But, monetary assistance wasn't the only thing that sustained their relationship. She was always understanding of his problems and was of great emotional support. Tim knew that while his sister did not exactly approve of Vivian Nyambura, she could never deride his marriage. At one point, she had wanted him to marry a *Luo* girl. In fact, she made numerous attempts to introduce him to some nursing students at Kenyatta Medical College but his heart wasn't there. When he failed, repeatedly, to honour dates or call these women, she never pestered him.

The closeness and support that he got from his sister made him a little chary of some of her male friends. As for Amu, Tim never really liked him, anyway. He preferred her sister's former boyfriend, Tom, the rich and spoilt son of John Tunde, a Homa Bay Wholesaler. Back in the days when his sister was still at college, Tom would pick him up in a big Mitsubishi Pajero and, together, they would pry all the *Nyama Choma* and beer joints in town before settling at Wedewo Bar & Night Club in Chunga Moyo. After all the rendezvous, Tom would always give him pocket money. The entrance of Amu into his sister's life and their subsequent marriage had completely changed the equation. Unlike Tom, Amu was stingy with his money and never warmed to his presence. Amu treated him like a spoilt child who always needed counsel. So, as they say, he voted with his feet—preferring to see his sister at her place of work rather than at her home. When it was inevitable, he took Amu's advice without any qualms, only to do the contrary. But now, Amu was no longer in the picture, so he did not need to worry about him at all.

The telephone rang and the children ran inside to answer it. "Mummy, it is Mama Chad. She wants to talk to you," Anna shouted through the window.

"Ayugi, is that you? How are you, Mrs Kisa?" Sembe said as soon as she took the receiver.

"Fine, indeed. I was told you have visitors and one of them is a man. Is it what I am thinking?"

"Come on ...It is my brother, Tim, and his beloved Vivian."

"I haven't seen them in a long time. Pass on my greetings. Tell him that he still owes me a visit with his beloved wife. By the way, there is some story about that wife of his. Is her name Vivian Nyambura?"

"Yes."

"Do you people know her folks?"

"I am sure nobody in our family knows anything about her because they have never been interested in Tim's life. And you know how he is..."

"Yes, but I understand the lady's folks are loaded. Her family owns a big coffee farm in Murang'a."

"Are they? I could do with some money right now," Sembe said jokingly. "But I am sure you are not calling me about Tim."

"That was by the way. I wanted to tell you that John and I were thinking of going to Jambo Jambo Park today. You know Kwasa Kwasa, the Congolese singer, he will be there. We wanted to go on Friday but John only came back from Kampala last night. By the way, my mother-in-law, whom I have not met, sent me some nice *Kitenge*. You must see them, girl. Anyway, we thought you should come with us to Jambo Jambo Park tonight."

"You know, I cannot come now since I have nobody to dance with."

"You can ask Toni to come."

"Nooo."

"I was just kidding. Look, you will have us. Moreover, you don't need to dance if you don't feel like it. You can sit down somewhere comfortable and enjoy the music. I know you adore Kwasa Kwasa. Remember the way we used to enjoy his songs in college?"

"It is not that easy, Ayugi. Moreover, I have visitors. I cannot leave them here by themselves."

"If you are talking about Tim and company, then we can pick them up too. I am sure they will love it."

"Okay, give me time to think about it. I will need to talk to Tim as well. Let me call you after an hour."

"Fine, I will wait for your call. John has taken a friend to the airport. If I don't receive your call by the time he comes back, I will call you."

"That's fine. Catch you later."

She needed time to think about this. Being in the middle of a dirty divorce, she wasn't sure that going to a social event was a good idea. Emotionally, she was drained, not to mention the lassitude from grappling with the consequences of their separation. Looking back, the separation appeared to have taken a momentum of its own, rewarding each of them with consequences, most of which were unintended. While she got custody and may have had lush moments of amorous dalliance with Tony, Amu, from what she heard, had not married Beth and wasn't planning to do so. It was this that sent her thoughts wondering about what he was up to. Perhaps he wanted to bring Beth home once the divorce was finalised. On the other hand, it didn't seem feasible that he would still be interested in salvaging the marriage. She remembered some

of the unpalatable lies that he told in his affidavit and the decrepit innuendos about her character that his lawyer had harped on in court. A man who has any feeling for his wife cannot say such things about her—not in court, not anywhere. Perhaps, Amu never had any real feelings for her in the first place and this is why he sought the arms of Beth. But if he did love Beth, why did he not marry her now? Could it be that Amu wasn't capable of loving and respecting one woman and one woman only? Why did he pretend to be so loving at first; standing by her even in the most difficult of circumstances, and siring children with her, when he knew that he was on the run? Perhaps, this is how men behave—like robbers. They steal your allegiance, your hope, your respect and your love then scuttle them capriciously. To them, marriage is like a child's playhouse, flimsy and nebulous.

She looked out of the window. She saw her brother helping his wife with her hair. She wondered whether he was different. Will he treat her in the same way two, three years down the line? One thing was certain though; they were indeed fond of each other and whatever was to be the future of their relationship, nobody could tell. This was Gods' business. But, was it not this same God who gave her and her husband all the good things yet, not the will and balance to be able to live together? They certainly had more money and a better education than many people. They had children too but, they could never find happiness. Could it be that happiness is a rare concession that God gives to humankind whenever Satan isn't looking? She remembered a preacher once saying that, for every trial that a person suffers, there is a hidden blessing. If there were any such blessing in her situation, then it was permanently hidden. The struggles and suffering precipitated by their separation did not seem to yield forth any good. Her greatest aggravation was the solitude. She had the children but, still, although she hated to admit it, she felt completely powerless to redirect her life towards a more meaningful and purposeful existence without any lingering concerns about the gap that could otherwise be occupied by a husband and a father to her children. While her personal needs could be shelved, she hated her children growing up without Daddy being in their home. What could she do about it? Nothing! She was a strong woman, this she did not doubt but there were things she couldn't

expunge from her mind, no matter how hard she tried. Perhaps, what she needed was time away from home, away from herself. Perhaps, a little relaxation is what she needed and Kwasa Kwasa wasn't a bad preposition, after all.

The place was bubbling with excitement. Everywhere, people were talking, laughing, drinking and mingling yet Sembe felt removed from it all. She was sitting at the end of the table, quite left out of the tête-à-tête that Ayugi and others next to her were enjoying. Staring gloomily into space, she was too absorbed in her own thoughts to be part of the excitement. A waiter in a white shirt and a black bow tie stopped beside her. "A drink?" he asked. She ordered a cold soda. If she was to endure the party, she might as well have something to drink. In no time, the waiter came back with the soda. He placed the bottle on the table then removed its cap. She brought the bottle of soda to her lips and took a long sip until the bottle stuck to her lips.

Once again, she scanned the crowd. Men and women of all shapes and sizes were gearing themselves up for a great show by the famous Congolese musician. But, it wasn't for the love of music that many in the crowd came to Jambo Jambo Park that night. There was a group of women, some whose husbands had died of questionable causes who had come with the express purpose of finding men. They preyed on young unsuspecting males who had probably just left college and were now in well paid jobs and also, on other women's husbands. As she lifted her head, she saw Dora, the notorious husband snatcher, who was rumoured to be a girlfriend of a senior politician, but who was keeping a young man in her house in Rose Gardens. Dora's husband had died three years ago after ailing for a long time. Fortunately for her, the man had made handsome money out of a clearing and forwarding business in town. It was an open secret that the reason for his success was that he had helped traders to avoid paying taxes for their imports. Despite the rumour that his ailment was AIDS related, Dora was still alive and healthy. She was in the company of Joyce Watwamba Adera, also a widow, and a group of other women of the same ilk. Joyce was a college graduate who

was married to a former Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Tertiary Education, as a third wife. When the man was fired, Joyce left the matrimonial home in a hurry but not before taking the property in Runda, one Mercedes Benz and emptying the hefty account that they jointly held at the Mapesa Bank. These women were flirting madly, no doubt, willing to do anything to get what they wanted.

The men folk too, had their share of wayward behaviour. Men of profession were the most notorious. When they came in, Sembe remembered seeing TJ, the famous Nairobi lawyer who was reputed for his sex scandals. It was still a mystery to her how he managed to keep his marriage intact. The story of the lawyer being found having sex in his car with a guest at his daughter's birthday party was still fresh in many a people's mind. The matter couldn't be so deplorable if it was never revealed that the guest was the wife of one of his cousins. On the dance floor, was Dr Ondoro, the gynaecologist, whose practice was in shambles because he was rumoured to be suffering from AIDS. Despite being over fifty years of age, the doctor had no wife. He was known to be sleeping with his patients and, later, assisting them to abort their pregnancy illegally. His reputation had suffered so much that he had to shut down his clinic in the upscale Westlands area and move to Eastleigh. Rumour had it that, even in Eastleigh, he wasn't doing too well. There he was, on the dance floor, wearing tight-fitting black leather trousers, a white T-shirt and a leather jacket. His partner, a slim, light-skinned woman whom Sembe couldn't recognise, was dressed similarly.

Thank God, Sembe wasn't that pathetic. Despite being practically divorced, she would never behave in such a manner. She believed in hard work and not sleeping her way to the top. "Men will always try to get you into bed," her aunt had told her once, while inculcating in her the true virtues of a married *Luo* woman. She had held to this virtue despite many temptations. Even now, when her status was a little confusing, she would never stoop to that level of moral decrepitude. Moreover, she found it much easier and quite convenient to carry herself as a married person which she was, legally. The divorce case had not been finalised and neither had the elders affirmed her status through the customary process. And because she had not reconciled her position, she felt a little awkward about her relationship with Toni. Perhaps, it was good that she did not ask him to come along to Jambo Jambo that night.

“Sembe,” a man exclaimed, slipping his hand around her waist then lowering it to the small of her back; a bit lower and he would be caressing her buttocks.

Turning sharply, Sembe saw Morris Katwenga, her workmate.

“Morris, it is good to see you.”

“You look so beautiful,” he said, easing himself into a seat next to her.

She knew he was lying, but said, “Thank you. You look wonderful too.”

Morris, like other men she knew, had a reputation. He preyed on older women with money. Since she joined the World Bank project, Morris had tried a number of times to date her by inviting her to unsolicited lunches and tea. She had turned him down and, on occasion, hinted to him that he was barking up the wrong tree. But, being the predator that he was, he persisted, thus, forcing her to tell him about Toni. She also cooked up a resume of Toni making him out to be a convicted murderer recently released from prison. That kept Morris away. Today, she was alone and Toni wasn’t beside her. He was bound to try. As luck would have it, Morris’s attention turned elsewhere when a burly woman called him aside. It wasn’t long before Morris and that woman were on the floor, dancing. Whoever she was, she had money to spare!

Amu couldn’t fathom how he let Cosmas and Osolo drag him along to the musical show at Jambo Jambo Park that night. In his state of mind, he did not find fun in dancing, let alone mixing with the mass of people that the show was bound to pull. But, Cosmas and Osolo had whined and cried until he agreed to join them, out of sheer aggravation. Since the divorce, his love for music had waned to the extent that he was unaware of the latest Congolese tunes and he did not care about them either. He loathed open gatherings of friends and would often shy away from Harambees and weddings. He still loved his beer though, especially in the evenings. He would hold court at one of the two places where both the lighting and sound were muted—The Closet on Mama Ngina Street, and Kombos on the outskirts of the Valley Arcade shopping district, a few

kilometres' drive from his house. Both places were frequented by a more upscale clientele comprising of Nairobi businessmen and professionals. In them, he found company in the likes of Professor Otieno McOnyango, a chubby economist who boasted of knowing everything there is to know about the science of economics, and Kiboko wa Matunda, a spent opposition politician whose only claim to fame was a four-year detention stint during the first decade of the country's independence, and, of course, his usual comrades.

Half an hour into the party, Amu had downed a couple of beers and made some small talk with Cosmas and a few others. Then, he saw her. He couldn't tell whether it was the beer or the lighting that made her look so beautiful. He wondered whether she was alone. Then, he saw her friend, Ayugi, and her husband. *The bitches were together, planning how to rob him of his money and property*, he thought. A quick rush of anger shot through his veins, dazzling him with a blast of hatred and fury. He took a long deep breath and fought to keep his body still. When he couldn't control himself any longer, he marched over to where she was sitting and attempted to pull her out of the chair." Come here! I want to talk to you—now!" he bellowed with a pugnacious attitude.

"There is nothing to talk about. I have left you for good so you had better get used to the idea," Sembe told him, stunned and dismayed by his show of fury.

When she did not oblige, he tugged again. The hem of her dress caught the end of the table and tore with a searing. This infuriated her. She stood up, wrested herself from his grip and stormed through the crowd of onlookers. The spectacle was probably more exciting to the crowd than the musical performance that they had paid so much money to watch. She walked briskly in the cool night breeze until she reached the gate. *It was a mistake coming here tonight*, she thought. Now, she wanted to get home, take a long hot bath and forget the events of the night.

Suddenly, Amu grabbed her arm. "You are not going anywhere," he blustered.

"Let go of me!" Sembe demanded.

When Tim saw Amu following his sister to the gate, he ran after them. "Let her go, man," he said to Amu while still at a distance.

Amu turned to Tim and hit him hard with his fist. Tim was unmoved.

“Now, you want to fight me, heh? You want a fight so a fight you will get, you *mafi ya kuku!*” Tim shouted.

Before Tim could launch into him, a group of friends intervened. Immediately, two security officers showed up and walked the whole group into the security office. Amu was obviously drunk and his behaviour was completely out of line. Despite pleas from Cosmas and others that the matter be settled there and then, and without the involvement of the police, the security officer did not budge. He called the police who arrived in an instant. Amu was whisked into a waiting Police Land Rover and taken to Rukara Police station. The Kisas drove Sembe home and managed to come back to Jambo Jambo Park before the musical performance began.

A familiar person was visiting them. He was shown into the guest room for the night. Later, the visitor turned into a huge python, to the size of *Omieri*, the famous Nyakach snake. The python was roaming the house, threatening to swallow his daughters. His wife was asleep and he couldn't wake her up. He tried to call her but words wouldn't come out of his mouth. He tried to rise from the bed but his body was stuck. In a state of desperation, he struggled to free himself until his eyes opened. He had been dreaming. He was glad to be awake and to find that it was only a dream. The reality that swept over him wasn't all that pleasant either. It was already morning and streaks of daylight reached through the broken windows of the cell. He could remember spending the evening with his friends at Jambo Jambo Park and then going to talk to his wife. Thereafter, they were involved in a fight. He must have been very drunk.

It was a pity that whenever he made contact with his wife, they always quarrelled and, every time, it was he who suffered, not she. Last time, it was the same thing and it cost him a hefty sum of eighty-five thousand shillings to redeem everything that had gone wrong in the process. He couldn't believe that he was in the same mess again. He tried to move his body but he couldn't. He had a

thumping headache which he associated with the terrible hangover from the previous night's drinking. The cold cell had intensified his sinus and cough. His body and the dirty clothes on it, smelled like an abattoir. Out of curiosity, he lifted his forearm to smell his armpits. The odour was so repulsive that he almost puked. His body had imbibed the pungent fumes emanating from the prisoners most of whom had not taken a shower for months, the red bucket full to the brim with excreta and the smear of shit on the walls. He couldn't imagine the amount of soap and water that would be sufficient to remove the smell from his skin.

About an hour after Amu woke up, Cosmas came to see him. He brought a soda and cake, which the police constable on duty insisted that Cosmas must taste before giving them to Amu. The sight of food made Amu's stomach churn. Except for beer, he had not eaten anything since the day before. He gulped the soda and munched the cake while they talked. His friend's visit was a welcome relief from the isolation and loneliness. That morning, Cosmas was the small light in his fuzzy recollection of what could have brought him to this snake pit. Cosmas narrated the details of what transpired the previous night and he felt disgusted with himself. The same story of his life seemed to have unfolded. He did not need to confront his wife in that way, nor fight any of her relatives. He regretted it deeply and asked Cosmas to forgive him. Like a true friend, Cosmas went ahead and attempted to secure his release. The police refused to do so because they were waiting for Sembe and Tim to lodge an official complaint and record statements. They intended to take Amu to court. In such circumstances, Cosmas couldn't do much. When he was ready to leave, Amu gave him the keys to the Volvo and asked him to retrieve it from the Jambo Jambo Park.

Amu spent another night at Rukara.

On Monday morning, Cosmas, Kizito and Auntie Didi came. Sembe had not recorded any statement so the police had no reason to hold him except if they wanted to push some general charge like being drunk and disorderly in a public place. This was taken care of by Auntie Didi. Amu was released that morning after signing a personal bond of five hundred shillings and donating one thousand shillings in cash to some unspecified account. Cosmas informed him that his car had

been towed by the police to traffic headquarters. Despite his anger at Sembe, Amu was happy to be free. He needed to take a shower and have a good breakfast. He also needed a whole day of sleep.

Auntie Didi took him home. After all, Hurlingham was on the way to her Rose Gardens residence. She left him outside the gate to his apartment block and drove away. Amu trotted to the compound, choosing to take the stairs to his first floor apartment. When he got to the door, he noticed that something was wrong. The door was wide open and papers were strewn all over. His lounge suite was missing so was his television set and stereo system. His clothes, including his suits, were not in the wardrobe. Missing, as well, were: kitchen utensils, shoes, wall pictures and his lap-top computer. The bedroom was empty except for an old pair of underpants and a pack of pills. Virtually all his things were gone. The house had been swept clean. Only books and papers remained. He knew that he had been robbed and he needed to report to the police right away. Although the thought of encountering the police once again wasn't very comfortable, there wasn't any alternative.

He walked down to Hurlingham shopping centre and called Cosmas. Fortunately, he found him at home, having lunch. When he told him about the theft, he promised to come right away. Together, they went to Kilimani Police Station and reported the matter. The process of recording the statements, dusting for fingerprints and completing the usual procedures, took the police the whole afternoon. Later, they went to Cosmas's place in Adams Arcade. After dinner, Cosmas took his friend to Hurlingham but not before giving him a mattress, a few extra blankets and bed sheets, and a few shirts and trousers.

The next day was a Tuesday. Amu did not go to work. He needed to retrieve his car from the police and to arrange for the purchase of some essential furniture. He went to traffic headquarters where he paid the towing charge and a fine for a traffic offence which wasn't quite clear to him. He drove out of the police yard then headed straight to Mata supermarket on Uhuru Highway. He intended to check the prices of beds and, maybe, some lounge suite. He also needed a few saucepans and cutlery. As he turned into Upper Hill Road, he passed Sembe's house and went down a steep hill. Then, he noticed a raggedy Land Rover following him. It had

passengers in the back. He did not think much of it until the same Land Rover followed him into the Mata supermarket parking area. When he climbed out of his car, the passengers in the Land Rover mobbed him as though he had done something wrong. A portly man emerged from the front of the vehicle and approached him. He held a clipboard with papers attached to it.

“*Mzee*, we ala auctioneers and we want to ndake this mbaby light here,” he said, thumping on the bonnet of the Volvo.

Amu did not understand what was going on. He knew it had to be a mistake.

“This car is mine,” he said in surprise.

“Yes, it was yours, Amu Deda, but now it wir mbe ours—for a few ndays, Sir. Unress, of course, you ala lady to mbay us the sum idigated in dis ngourt onder,” he said, showing the paper on the clipboard.

Amu looked at the papers. It was something to do with his divorce case. The court ordered the collection of a hefty sum, the total of which came to over two hundred thousand shillings. The principal sum of one hundred and eighty thousand shillings was the arrears in maintenance. The rest were costs incidental to the enforcement of the order. The portly man was filling out a proclamation as his people were busy fastening chains and lifting the Volvo in readiness for towing. The altercation drew many onlookers, especially since it was a couple of metres from the entrance to the supermarket. Within no time, the transaction was completed. The portly man shoved a copy of the proclamation into to Amu’s hands then jumped into the already moving Land Rover.

He wasn’t only inconvenienced but, also, thoroughly humiliated. He took a Matatu to town and quickly headed to M. Kambero’s office. He found the lawyer in his office, busy drafting some documents. His story wasn’t very pleasant—the arrest, robbery and attachment of his car, all occurring in one weekend. Kambero immediately called Wanja, Sembe’s lawyer, to ask whether there was a way in which Amu could be accommodated. She was unrelenting at first but, after several minutes of pleading, she agreed to release the car on condition that Amu paid half the principal sum and all costs, including the auctioneer’s charges, immediately. Furthermore, he was to pay the balance of the arrears within one

month and, thereafter, to be liable to further attachment without recourse to the court if he defaulted on a single payment. The deal was stiff but it was all he could secure. After these negotiations, Kambero expressed grave concern about the manner in which the case was proceeding. For now, he advised Amu to find the money so that the auctioneers did not sell his car. "They are crooks," he said. "And, once something of value gets into their hands, you may as well say goodbye to it." They also agreed that Mr. Kambero would investigate a way to revive the appeal against the maintenance order. But, this could only be done after his car was returned to him and he found some money.

That week, Amu's major preoccupation was raising the one hundred thousand shillings he needed to retrieve his car. He had to put aside his plans to buy household items until his situation was resolved. He sought to raise the money through his office. He talked to Opiyo, the accounts clerk, who informed him that the only money he could take in the form of an IOU was twenty thousand shillings. Later, Opiyo delivered the money to his office and he signed for it. According to company rules, the money was due in a day or two but, in practice, senior managers were often allowed to retain the money until the next pay date. Then, he called the Co-operative fellows and was advised to apply for an emergency loan. Since he had never applied for such a loan before, he could probably secure eighty thousand. The process was to take one week. Two days before the date of sale, Amu had one hundred thousand shillings in cash. He went to see Mr Kambero who, in turn, called Wanja. It was agreed that the sum of ninety thousand be paid directly to Wanja and the rest to the auctioneer. Mr Kambero sent the cheque to Wanja and advised his client to fetch his car from the auctioneer's office in Kabangi North.

It was a problem getting there since neither Amu nor Cosmas had been to that part of town for a long time. After several wrong turns and misleading directions from roadside vendors, they found the auctioneer's office behind some huge industrial warehouse on Shamanzi Road. The Volvo was parked at the entrance. From the appearance of its tyres, there was no doubt that it had been used. Armed with twenty thousand shillings, they walked into the auctioneer's inner office. Amu recognised the man behind the desk as the same one who had towed away his car a few days ago. Amu told him that he had come to collect his car, yes, the Volvo. The

auctioneer pulled out a file and made some calculations. It turned out that the sum that was owed was twenty-five thousand and not twenty. At the same time, Wanja called the auctioneer while Amu and Cosmas were there, to inform him that there was some discrepancy in the accounting. She needed Amu to pay that month's sum of twenty thousand in addition to the arrears. Thus, if he were to take the car, he needed a further sum of twenty-five thousand, a sum which Amu did not have. Since they had given the auctioneer the twenty thousand, and there was no way of retrieving it, they left the place with neither the money nor the car. Cosmas immediately offered to give Amu five thousand shillings but, this would be of no immediate use unless Amu could raise another twenty there and then. It took Amu further three days to find the money. Auntie Didi gave him ten thousand and friends from The Closet raised the rest. When he took the money to the auctioneer, he found that the car had been sold that morning.

Two months later, Sembe was surprised to find a cheque for ninety thousand shillings on her desk. Wanja had enclosed a small note, explaining that the money was part of the arrears in maintenance that was recovered from her husband. She was pleased that now she could finish building the wall around the property. When she bought it from the government, the house was in bad state of repair. Toni had helped her to find a good contractor who restored it to its original beauty. Now, she was building a wall around the property and she had plans to refurbish the servants' quarters as well, but the finances were dwindling especially since Amu wasn't helping with the children's school fees. Convinced that the difficult times were now behind her, she leaned back in her chair, intending to relax and relieve her mind of the past. But, as the chair reclined, and her body slid towards the desk, she caught sight of a maroon card that was sticking out from one of the drawers. She pulled it out carefully and placed it on the desk. It was an invitation card that Auntie Didi had sent her just before they went to England. Her husband was taking up a post in London and he decided to move there with his family. Sembe wondered what would have

happened if Auntie Didi were still in the country. Perhaps, her relationship with Amu would have fared differently. She also wondered what success was, in view of the fact that her marriage was in shambles. Slowly, the feeling of triumph that had pervaded her thoughts a while ago, were replaced with anger and discontent.

She sat in silence, allowing her brain to imbibe her discordant and wild thoughts. They swished through her mind like sea waves, the present mixing with the past, all into a haze of froth that clouded her mind. As she struggled to make sense of it all, discern what was real and what was spurious, the memory of her teenage days entered her memory. Yes, the happy old days when a girl could dream about places, even as far away as Nairobi or Mombasa. The days when desires and aspirations were so entwined with the sheer nudge to perform well at school and to please one's parents. Everything was possible if you passed the national examination—that is what she was told both at home and at school. Thus, it became a quest; the ambition to justify the possibility of seemingly wanton dreams of success and the good life that she so earnestly believed could only be found in the City of Nairobi, becoming a reality one day. She remembered how, together with her classmates, they would look through the fence to see the evening buses pass by, heading to Nairobi, and they would dream about the possibility of being on those buses one day. They would read about the city in the newspapers, how events of great importance were taking place there, and wish that they too, were part of them all. Also, they would read about the University of Nairobi and the disgruntled students who were constantly going on strike. How so fervently they wished to be a part of the 'demented' lot. The stories their schoolmates who lived in the city told about the pleasure spots, the fun and the sophistication all processed through a frame of mind that conjured its own images about the city, regaled their imagination. For her, the wishes seemed to come true almost immediately. Even before she finished high school, she visited her brother, Okola, who had just been employed by Kenya Railways. Later, of course, she came to the city to attend the University of Nairobi. She had now lived in the city for about twenty years and, within this time, her life had seen a lot of improvement. Although still on course, struggling to improve herself, so many good things had happened to her, some even exceeding her youthful dreams and expectations.

Whatever she wanted badly enough she always got. She wanted to go to college and obtain a degree; she got this. She wanted to work and live in Nairobi, she got this. She wanted to have a car of her own; she got one. She wanted to go abroad; she did so many times. She wanted children; she had them. She wanted happiness and a husband who would love her forever, but this had eluded her. And because of this, it seemed as though life wasn't turning out exactly how she wanted it to be. Perhaps, it was she who missed a decisive step in the abstruse journey towards a happy and lasting marital union. But when could this have happened? Was it when she left home after the fight? Was it when she filed the law suit? It was all very confusing. Perhaps, it wasn't even useful to think about.

Amu came back from the party feeling completely exhausted. It wasn't the booze or the chatter that wore him down, but the prodigious feeling of forlornness that had struck him so bluntly as soon as Auntie Didi finished giving her farewell speech. However, he held on until he reached home. The short speech, doused with words of regret, appreciation, encouragement and good wishes, and conveyed in a pleasant tone of voice with a slight *Lao* drawl was, unmistakably, the high point of the evening. That it had evoked so much emotion, and set upon him melancholy and wanton disconcertion, wasn't entirely unexpected. Auntie Didi herself was almost beset by tearful emotions when she lamented the loneliness that her family would suffer once settled in the United Kingdom. She asked friends to pray for them. For him, it wasn't only the loneliness; her leaving the country meant that a complete change in his life was in the offing. She was his anchor, armour and spear and, without her, he doubted whether anything would ever be the same. As he crawled onto the bed that night, he wondered why a woman as successful as his aunt should decide to follow her husband abroad, instead of remaining behind to manage the family business. In his opinion, Auntie Didi would have done just fine with occasional visits and vacations abroad. What was it about women that made it so difficult for them to give their men a little freedom?

Chapter Sixteen

SINCE HIS DIVORCE CASE and association with Mr Kambero, Amu learnt a great deal about the courts and how they functioned. Now, he knew how important the breed of persons called court clerks were to the system. They were the managers of the court registry and nothing could transpire in the courts without going through them first. They received court papers, assessed the courts' fees that were due, and filed them. They also set dates for hearings, prepared cause lists for each day of business and were generally responsible for the movements of court files. It was difficult to get anything going unless you knew how to work with them. Amu was introduced to one called Obiero Kit Kendo. He was a tall bearded man who always dressed in a suit and tie. Visitors to the court thought he was a lawyer or a judge. But Obiero was a pest of the worst kind. Once he knew where Amu was working, he would stop by the office every Friday afternoon to ask for money, allegedly for a funeral or a Harambee or something of the sort. But, Amu enjoyed his patronage nonetheless because he also took care of all his court files and was keen to monitor all the papers that were placed inside them. Sometimes, he would bring copies of documents to Amu's office before the same were officially filed.

Amu understood why it was easy for court files to disappear. The clerks had interest in the cases just as much as the litigants. It wasn't difficult to find a clerk who dealt with both litigants in the same case—eating from both sides so to speak. Amu couldn't have believed this until he found Obiero doing exactly the same. Actually, it was Mr Kambero who discovered this. Apparently, he was at the ministry where he saw Obiero having tea with Sembe. Amu never confronted Obiero about this matter. He became smarter by limiting information and making his charity a little thinner.

Amu's dealings in the courts brought him into contact with many lawyers but, none fascinated him more than Mish, Kambero's friend. From what he came to learn, Kambero and Mish shared a room both at the university and at the Kenya School of Law. Unlike Kambero, Mish was a talkative sort and quiet seemed to weigh on him like a stone. He talked about everything, including the throes of legal practice, much more freely than his friend. Often, he would complain about a cadre of his professional colleagues who were enjoying all the lucrative contracts while the rest of them were left with the crumbs. Although it seemed obvious that Mish was financially constrained, he would never admit it. And, even when the matter of the location of his office on the filthy corner of River Road Street was mentioned, he would dismiss it with the tired cliché of "taking legal services to the people".

Despite all his shortcomings, Mish seemed to be more practical than his friend, Kambero, at least from Amu's point of view. Mish believed that there was a solution to every problem and this endeared him to Amu. This is why he was able to convince Amu that whatever he couldn't get through a court hearing, he could get through a private session with the judge. His argument was that society was rotten and so was the law and legal practice. When the property case was fixed for hearing, Mish offered to assist Amu to "talk" to a Judge. "Talking" to a judge meant giving out *kitu kidogo* and corrupting the course of justice. Although Mish's offer was appealing, Amu struggled to find moral justification for it. Born and bred in a Christian family, he was aware that Christian teachings forbade acts that influence the misuse of authority.

When Amu eventually decided to go along with Mish's suggestion to give the judge *Kitu Kidogo*, he knew that he was selling his soul to the devil. However, he consoled himself with the belief that even God needed a helping hand. After all, he only helps those who help themselves. Still, he knew that he had to tread the illegal path with utmost caution. The fact that Mish, a lawyer, was engaging in an illegal deal, spoke quite naturally of the man's proclivity to the get-rich-quick schemes. Since Mish did not strike him as being overly philanthropic, Amu thought it wise to be careful of him. When Mish called two weeks later to inform him that he had arranged for a meeting with the judge—the same judge who would be hearing his case, Amu had doubts. Although he thanked Mish and promised

to get back to him within a few days, his mind was fixed on finding an independent opinion on the matter. This is why he sought Obiero from the law courts and summoned him to an urgent meeting.

"You know that my case is coming up for hearing next month?" Amu told Obiero when the sleazy clerk showed up at Industrial Area later the same evening.

"Oh, yes. Is it not the fifth of next month? I confirmed it last week."

"There are a few things that I wanted to know. First, do you know the judge who will preside over it?"

"No, we don't. You know, formerly, we would assign cases to judges a week or even a month in advance but that brought many complaints so the Chief Justice changed the system. Cases are assigned a day before and hearing lists come out in the morning of the same day. It is not possible to know the judge who will hear your case. Why are you asking? Are you intending to make any plans?" Obiero asked.

"Not exactly. I just thought I should know."

"Well, if you are making some plans with somebody, you must involve me also because I can ensure that the file goes to the right person."

"Really?"

"Yeah. That is something I could do, only that it would involve more than just me and I may need some cash to persuade the persons concerned. You see, the court is my home-ground so I know how to go about my affairs."

"So the files can go to any judge?"

"No. You see, in every session, the Chief Justice assigns judges to the various departments. Some are put on criminal matters, others on divorce cases while others are given accident claims and things like that. Since your property case is an Originating Summon, it will likely be heard by certain judges."

"So, the possibility is on how many judges?"

"I don't know the precise number. I can check that tomorrow but I think it is about six."

"Can you check this tomorrow and let me know?"

"Yes of course. *Jaduong*, you seem like you are onto something big. I will be happy to help."

Armed with this knowledge, he telephoned Mish. Word for word, Mish confirmed what Obiero had said. The strength of his arrangement was that the judge was influential enough to get the file placed before him. Amu, convinced that the arrangements were feasible, and the lawyer wasn't taking advantage of his ignorance, supported the plan and agreed to participate in it. His only other concern was the money—the exact amount that the Judge might ask for. Since, by that time, Mish had contacted the judge and even fixed an appointment for Friday that week, he could wait until then.

There was much publicity in the press about the corruption in the judiciary but Amu was never too keen to follow the subject. Despite Mish's assurance, he still wondered how the *kitu kidogo* could be passed to the judge and whether it would be an easy thing to do. Many issues came to his mind, signalling the difficulty of this endeavour. He had been to the court several times and was well aware of the intrigue involved in getting a case placed before the judge and for the same to proceed to a hearing. The odds would be multiplied if there was a preferred judge. Even if this was somehow fixed, what would happen if his wife's lawyer asked for an adjournment or the judge was ill so that another was appointed in his place? These were the thoughts that went through his mind as he sat languidly in the lobby of Hotel Sim Sim in Parklands, waiting to make the acquaintance of the most important man in his life at that particular time.

The judge wore a neat grey suit that was slightly small for him, a striped shirt with silver cufflinks, his initials engraved in bold relief, and a blue silk tie. His black shoes were polished to perfection and were set off by a pair of embroidered dark blue socks. His entire garb was so buff that nary a button or thread was out of place. In keeping with his size and stature, he strode slowly across the hotel lobby, shrugging his shoulders, apparently indicating to those who wanted to know, that he preferred company when he finally reached his destination. When he finally sat on the paisley patterned chaise lounge towards the end of the lobby, a waiter followed him and so did the lawyer and his friend. The waiter was asked to bring the usual for the judge and beer for the other two. A man, dressed in a black suit, walked up to their table. "Sir, you had left your jacket here last week and we kept it for you," the man said. "Also, Kamau has been here several times. He even left a telephone number where he can be reached. He said it was urgent."

"Thank you, Njoli," the judge said while stretching his hand to take the jacket and the note. "That is my contractor", he said while facing the lawyer. "That house is eating all my resources."

"I thought it should be finished by now, my Lord. Was it not January when we were talking about it?" Mish asked.

"No, it was February."

"Oh yes, it was February."

"It is not finished yet. Now, they are plastering the inside."

"It shouldn't take long now."

"Yes, the structure. I am now worried about the finishing. Somebody suggested to me that I should go to Dubai if I want very good deals on bathroom and electrical fittings."

The discussion was again interrupted by the man in a black suit. This time, he came to announce that Kamau had arrived. The judge was obviously pleased by this announcement. "Give him something to drink and I will talk to him in a minute," he instructed the man. Turning to the lawyer he said, "Can we talk in private?"

Mish asked Amu to wait in the lobby.

Amu walked back to the lobby and sat in a sofa next to the door. His eyes quickly took in the classy décor of the hotel, its gleaming hardwood floor and stylish high arched ceiling as well as the perfect combination of carefully selected antiques and the exquisite wood carvings of African wildlife. The splendour of the surroundings lifted his spirits. While he knew that he was about to provide the much needed resources for the judge's construction project, his inclination was more towards the joy of participating in the events that would influence the outcome of the court case. He stretched his hand to feel whether the money was still there—fifty thousand in cash. He felt happy. Finally, he was taking control of his affairs. Within ten minutes, the lawyer joined him in the lobby. "Can we talk?" he asked.

"Yes," Amu said as he hurriedly stood up.

"The judge has agreed to your request," he said with a wide grin on his face.

Amu followed him to the entrance, seeking to know more about the project.

"You know, he did not give me any indication of how much money he needs but is categorical that he would appreciate some

help,” the lawyer said. “He will send his messenger with the details tomorrow.”

“So I will wait to hear from you—right?”

“Yeah, it looks like it. I will call you.”

They parted ways. Mish went back inside and Amu drove straight to The Closet where he found Cosmas and a group of his friends enjoying their evening drinks. He wasn’t at all in the mood to drink any beer. He handed Cosmas his car keys and left in a taxi.

A week later, Mish made contact. A sum of forty thousand shillings was to be paid to a hardware shop in Gikomba. He was to mention to the Asian shopkeeper that he was paying for Kamau’s order. He was not to take a receipt. Amu had anticipated that the judge might ask for fifty thousand shillings and had duly prepared himself. When it turned out that only forty thousand shillings was required, he felt relieved. He immediately did as directed, hoping that, from then on, his fortunes would change. He rang Mish and confirmed delivery. Mish was more than happy and, once again, assured his friend that everything would be taken care of. However, he cautioned Amu not to divulge the information to a single soul since such matters could have seriously negative consequences, especially now that there was talk about corruption in the judiciary.

Thereafter, the two did not talk to each other until a week before the hearing. Amu was somewhat anxious about the case so he decided to have a word with Obiero. Instead of letting Mish do everything, he thought perhaps he should solicit Obiero’s help just in case certain loose ends might need tightening. He went about it in a clever way. When Obiero came to see him on a Tuesday afternoon, he told him outright that Kambero found it easy to deal with certain judges and he named a few, including the one with whom he had a deal. He asked Obiero whether there was any possibility of the suit going before one of these judges.

“Yes these judges are good,” Obiero confirmed. “But, *Jaduong*, the best among the group was Justice Kimbilio. Unfortunately, he has retired and only comes to write his pending judgments.”

Amu couldn’t hide his astonishment. “Oh, so he does not hear any new cases?”

“Yes. He retired a month ago. You remember when I came to your office last time? His driver gave me a lift. He was picking up

the judge from a company in Industrial Area that wants to hire him as a legal consultant.”

“Oh, I see.”

“So, what are your plans?”

Amu contorted his face and said, “No plans for now, I will get back to you.”

After Obiero left, he called Mish who sounded very surprised at the news. “I have not heard of this,” he said. “Who told you?”

“Somebody at the High Court. Have you been there lately?”

“I go there every day yet I have never heard of such a thing. In fact, I saw our friend a few days ago but we never talked. Let me investigate the matter and get back to you today.”

Immediately, Amu began to wonder whether Mish had been truthful with him. There was no way that a practising lawyer would not know that a prominent judge was soon to retire. Given that he was never present during any of the discussions between the judge and Mish, there was a prodigious possibility that the judge had probably never heard of him at all. The more he thought of it, the more he was convinced that the judge never took his money. When Mish never called back, there was no doubt left in Amu’s mind that the whole scheme was a hoax, orchestrated by Mish and for his personal benefit.

A week before the hearing of the property suit, Sembe began to feel very uneasy. Inside, she battled with desperation, nagging guilt and, of course, the fear of a court process that would require her participation. Convinced that the court’s decision could never replace the loss that she had suffered, and feeling a lot more depressed at the prospect of losing any contact with the father of her children, she connived to sabotage the case. Perhaps, if she avoided seeing Wanja and even neglected to attend the proceedings the suit might fail—a tantalising artifice that served her emotional disposition that, lately, had drawn her closer and closer to reneging on the plans to end the marriage. The absurdity was enormous given the reality of their estrangement but the feelings were so tangible at times, she could almost touch them. At night, she could dream of

his physical presence beside her and she would be distressed when she woke up to loneliness. At other times, she could randomly react to his favourite habit or mannerism as though he was there, conversing with her. She was convinced that their connection, whether through telepathy or some kind of cosmic intervention, was alive and the abounding love hidden beneath it was just waiting for a trigger or jolt to manifest itself physically.

Her dreams aside, she did not need the Kileleshwa property and wasn't prepared to lie that she had bought it or anything like that. It was bad enough that she had said these things in her affidavit. This aside, giving testimony in an open court would definitely send a wrong signal, and surely put the last nail on the coffin of her marriage. It would be the ultimate betrayal of all the feelings that her heart was beginning to nurture. How she wished that her lawyer would understand that now, she wanted to make love not war, even though her actions so far had shown everything to the contrary.

But, Wanja Peters wasn't going to let her client's romanticism about lost love steer her away from her professional responsibility. She wanted to proceed with the trial and put the matter to rest. To this end, she kept on calling her and leaving telephonic messages both at home and at the office. When she couldn't reach her client, she sought help from Ayugi and her husband, which is why the couple showed up at Sembe's house on Sunday evening, two days before the hearing. Sembe was in bed although not exactly asleep. The children and the maid were in the kitchen preparing dinner. From her bedroom, she caught a faint whiff of food and she heard the noise of the children arguing. She also heard a car drive into the compound. She thought of rising to meet whoever it was but, then again, she felt lazy. It was Sunday so she was entitled to a little laxity. Moreover, it would probably be Toni making an appearance after a long time, or her brother, Okola, coming to borrow some money. None of these was exciting enough to lift her out of bed in an instant. The door slammed and whoever it was came into the living room. Before she had time to get up, Ayugi walked into the bedroom.

"Why are you sleeping now? Are you feeling unwell?" she asked with a smile all over her face.

"No. I was just tired," Sembe whispered as though the tone of voice was meant to confirm what she said. "How about you?"

Ayugi nodded enthusiastically. "I am fine. We are here with John. He is in the sitting room."

"Oh! I will get up and go to greet him."

"No, no, don't worry. We are in a hurry anyway. I asked him to bring me here because I wanted to find out how you are," Ayugi said, sitting primly by the bed-side. "Many people have been looking for you this week but they couldn't find you so I thought you might be ill or something."

"I am well. Who has been looking for me?"

"For one, your lawyer! And me, too."

"I have been feeling down lately. So many issues are on my mind right now."

"What are these issues? If you talk to someone, a friend, you could feel a lot better."

"Mainly, it is about the case—the property case. You see I have a good house and now my children are with me. I just don't think I should go to all that trouble to get more things from Amu. Secondly, you know that I didn't buy that house, neither have I made a single mortgage payment for it. For heaven's sake, I am not even a registered owner. I hate to fight for something which is not mine."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic about the case."

"I am not. It is just that it feels wrong, you know."

"Not to me."

Sembe studied her friend for a while. She wished that she had a brilliant argument, something profound; something that would make Ayugi see the depth of the emptiness in her heart. She had gone through hell for the past few months and, now, she just wanted some peace, time to relax and review her plans for the future. But, to her friend, this seemed so farfetched, an illusion that simply wasn't possible in a world where men, the aggressors, were to be alienated and punished.

Ayugi went on. "Under ordinary circumstances, you might be entitled to think that way, but these are not ordinary circumstances. The man, from what I hear, wants to begin a new life and completely forget about you and your daughters. Surely, this does give you some justification to go after any property that remotely belongs to you. Who knows? He might turn vindictive, seek to harm you or something."

"Amu has his flaws but he is not vindictive. He could be a liar or a philandering idiot but he is not vindictive. I have never heard anybody describe him as being so unless you know something I don't," Sembe protested.

"He lied about you in the affidavit and has more than once tried to harm you physically. Hasn't he?"

Sembe was silent.

"Hasn't he?"

"Yes."

"So, you see. All I am saying is that this is an opportunity for you to get something out of this mess, for your children. Look at me, Sem. How long have we been friends?"

"Many years."

"Forever. Have I ever misled you or wished you ill luck?"

"No."

"Why would I do so now? I can't. When you and Amu were together, I loved it. It was good. I respected him the same way I know you respect John. Look at what he has done to you. He has ruined your life and for doing so I cannot forgive him. I feel bad about everything but since I love you and I love your children just like my own, I cannot stand aside and see Amu mess around with their heritage. I didn't mean to tell you this but I happen to know that he spent last Christmas with Beth in Kisumu."

"Did he?" Sembe asked, sitting up on the bed. The information struck her like thunderbolt. She couldn't imagine that such important information had escaped her notice. All along, she was working on the theory that her husband might have been so wounded by the separation that he wasn't contemplating another marriage.

"Yes, he did. John told me. I understand that he wants to sell the Kileleshwa house and put more money into the Kisumu property where Beth and her son are now living. He wants to build a house for her, Sem. That hurts me a lot. He can't treat you and the girls in this way."

"I thought their relationship ended after Auntie Didi bought her off."

"Well it does not look that way to me. It was all a ploy; to move Beth and her son away from your sight while he continues to maintain them. Maybe, he had planned it well in advance too. Just think, Sem, think. How come he bought the property in Kisumu in the

first place? And when things got so hot with you here, she moves right into that property. Have you ever heard of a *Luo* man abandoning his son?"

Casting a deep and unhappy look at her friend, Sembe moved her mouth as though to say something but the words had disappeared somewhere between her throat and her mouth. From two feet away, Ayugi must have seen her friend's eyes swell with tears. She moved closer to her and held her shoulders. "I love you, Sem, and I will do everything for you. Just do this one thing—do it for me... and the girls, if you don't consider yourself worthy of respect. I want the bastard fixed so that he does not have the balls to please that harlot anymore."

Sembe sat silently for a long time without saying anything. Inside, the feeling of hatred and anger towards Beth was resurrected. For a long time, she had never thought of her or considered that she would be important in her life anymore. The sleazy skinny bitch had sneaked on her once again. If Amu was still sleeping with her, then he did not deserve the house.

"Will you do this for me?" Ayugi asked after a moment of silence.

"I will talk to Wanja tomorrow. I will go to court." She fought to hold back her tears and to keep her voice calm and steady.

"That's my girl. I have to go now. Will you be all right?"

"Yes."

"Call me anytime if you need me. I mean anytime. Get some sleep. Don't worry about us. We will find our way out."

"Thanks Ayugi. Bye."

On Tuesday, the day of the hearing, Amu and Mr Kambero arrived in court at eight thirty in the morning. Amu felt a little tired but the anxiety kept him going. The previous evening, they had a long session together in the lawyer's office, going over documents and important aspects of the trial. At night, he couldn't sleep. His thoughts travelled to places where it had been lately—the case, the betrayal by Mish and the lost love. He had spent the night trying to imagine why Sembe was bent on ruining him financially. Was this her way of getting back at him or was it a permanent vendetta that would never end until one of them goes to the grave? If this was

the case, what was he going to do about it? Not much! Certainly, he had to defend his property and, maybe, strive to attain some level of financial stability. But as far as love was concerned, doing nothing seemed to be as decisive as doing something. Either way, Sembe would probably never ever want him again. In the morning his thoughts were still ruffled. He decided to concentrate on the case as a way to lessen his aggravation.

High Court No. 2 was unlike the other rooms in the court precinct. It had a narrow outlook that concealed its true width, a balcony half the size of the main court room and two double doors facing the hallway. From the hallway and to the right, another door opened to a narrow staircase, leading to the balcony. The judge sitting in this court was Justice Wishbourne Raker, an elderly English gentleman who had found home in his country's former colony. Trained in England as a barrister, Justice Raker's practice in Manchester had been ruined by chronic alcoholism. He survived a short stint in a rehabilitation centre in London and, thereafter, became a Magistrate in a small claims court in Yorkshire. When the addiction kicked in again in 1972, he took leave and migrated to Kenya. Through his late wife's relatives who had been in Kenya since the 1940s, he got a job in the Attorney General's Chambers in Nairobi, rising to the post of chief Litigation Counsel in 1978. After the attempted military coup in August 1981, he was appointed as judge of the High Court of Kenya. He filled a position on the bench vacated by another expatriate judge who was forced to resign after a London tabloid reported that he was frequenting sleazy joints and spending time with prostitutes in Nairobi's back streets.

The seating arrangement in the main court room was almost a replica of what Amu had seen on the local television court drama, *Leo mahakamani*. At the front and between the two doors, was the judge's bench behind which hung the coat of arms and the president's portrait in a rather imposing frame. The judge's bench dwarfed the clerk's table immediately in front of it. The witness podium was positioned to its left and, on the right, there was an empty box where the accused persons would normally sit. The lawyer's bench was separated from the clerk's table by an open space, where the legal "dance" would normally take place, and from the audience, by a small gate. The padded benches set in three rows, provided seating for the public.

When Amu and his lawyer walked in, there was already a crowd and the numbers continued to swell by the minute. In his myopic calculation, he thought that everybody was there because of his case and he felt appalled by his circumstances. He would later learn that, on that day, High Court No. 2 was the venue for “allocations”, where matters unlikely to be heard because a judge was off duty or transferred, were being taken off the hearing list and reallocated to other judges or given new hearing dates. Amu scanned the crowd and was able to see his adversary seated in the far left corner of the court room. Despite an ugly spirit, she looked beautiful in a maroon jacket and white blouse. Beside her, was the brother Tim, uncharacteristically donned in a brown *Kaunda* suit, and holding a newspaper. When Amu looked across, their eyes met and Tim turned to face her sister. He said something and, she too, looked in his direction. Her face was tired and drawn, very unlike the first time he had seen her in court. Then, she was taut and belligerent; her expression pointed and determined. But, today, she was different. There was something remorseful, something unnerving about her that couldn't be explained only by the solicitude of an impending trial. He did not know how to feel about this. He looked down and bit his lip. There were days in their relationship when he could discern her disposition by the look on her face. But in those days, she had emotions that were pure and genuine. She could laugh or smile when happy, sulk when sad, and still be affectionate. In those days, their disagreements were thin, easily placated by simple gestures of remorse or intuitive displays of affection. Still wondering how things had changed between them, he walked over to the far right and secured a seating space just behind the lawyer's bench.

Sembe's lawyer, Wanja Peters, was in a group of female lawyers, all draped in long black gowns and white collar shirts with two thin tassels hanging on their chests like goats' tails. On their heads, were white wigs, some grey and curled, others plain and long; all displaying the quaint reverence of a profession so connected to the Anglo Saxon culture of the past century. Still, the garb accorded the courtroom its austere atmosphere, a mysterious quality that, for most lay people, was part and parcel of the intricacy and obscurity of the legal rigmaroles just about to unfold before their eyes. The lawyers were chatting incessantly as if they were an assemblage of an after

church vestry, oblivious completely of the gloom of their clients. It was as though the gravity of the matters upon which they were just about to do battle, were only of intellectual concern.

The court room came to order when Justice Raker, flanked by two well-dressed court clerks, each carrying a pile of court files, walked in. The judge had white hair already receding towards the back of his head, a mass of crooked teeth that filled his mouth, a rough face sculpted by the hard tropical heat and intermittent bouts of malaria, and visible DTs in his upper limbs, a condition that was consistent with his alcoholism. The entire court rose until the judge settled on his mighty seat. The lawyers scrambled to fill the benches and those who couldn't find a space, remained standing, an indication that their presence in that court was intended to be short. Immediately the judge sat, the two clerks bent over to confer with him. This took a while, allowing the court to recede into whispers. When the judge tapped his gavel the murmurs ceased and the proceedings began. The first cases that were called were "mentions", where parties were either fixing hearing dates or confirming compliance with earlier orders or withdrawing a case altogether. These went quickly and took care of almost half of the population in the court-room. The second set of cases was the "interlocutory applications", where some parties were seeking injunctive orders, others compliance with interrogatories or discovery of documents, others on security for attendance and matters of such a nature. These took some time and by the time the court had gone through its list, it was eleven o'clock. The judge indicated that it was an appropriate time for recess. Before he adjourned, he mentioned the two cases that were scheduled for full hearing to establish whether the parties were ready. When *Ndeda Versus Ndeda* was called, both lawyers indicated that they were ready. The parties in the other case were not ready so it was adjourned. The judge ordered for a thirty minute recess.

The court resumed at noon. Again, *Ndeda Versus Ndeda* was called out and both lawyers rose to introduce themselves. After what was considered to be an appropriate pause, the judge asked Wanja to call her first witness. Sembe walked over to the witness stand. A clerk walked to her side and handed her a bible. "Hold this Bible with your right hand and say after me," he said. "I swear that the

testimony I shall give to this court, touching on the matters in question, shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God.”

Sembe repeated after him.

“Will the witness please state her name and occupation for the record,” the judge said while holding his pen in readiness to record the information.

“Sembe Ndeda, your Lordship.”

“Is that Miss or Mrs?”

“Mrs”

“What do you do Mrs Ndeda?”

“I am Civil Servant working in the Ministry of Livestock. Currently, I have been seconded to a World Bank project within the Ministry—The Group Ranching Project.”

“Thank you, Mrs Ndeda.” And, to the lawyer, he said, “You may proceed Miss Peters.”

Wanja led Sembe through the examination-in-chief. At first, Sembe established her identity and her relationship with the respondent. She explained to the judge that she had been married to the respondent both under *Luo* customary law and under the Marriage Act. She gave details of the brief ceremony at the Attorney General’s chambers and produced a copy of the marriage certificate. Although not necessary to the case before the court, she narrated the events of her estrangement including the fight, his infidelity and the divorce case that was still pending before the court. She admitted having custody of their three daughters and gave an accurate statement of their ages and education. The fact of separation was mentioned, intended to add flavour to her current claim by insinuating that she was the weaker spouse and thus in need of the court’s protection. Then, she narrated how she assisted in the acquisition of all the property by taking over the household expenses to allow her husband to accumulate enough money for the purchases. She also took the court through the details of subsequent internal and external modifications that she, personally, did to the house in Kileleshwa and the new installations that she had made. In concluding her testimony she conceded that she would be willing to give up interests in all other properties if she was granted one half of the interests in the Kileleshwa property. This was a tactical approach meant to banish any misgivings about her

intentions as far as money or properties were concerned and to arouse the judge's sensibility to the benevolence of her claim. Just as her lawyer had anticipated, the judge was so overwhelmed by her generous gesture that he asked whether there was any possibility of settling the matter out of court—a suggestion that Amu's lawyer flatly refused.

The afternoon session began with Sembe's cross-examination. Mr Kambero put her to the task of detailing the exact amounts of money that she had contributed towards the purchase of the properties. She was unable to give figures, claiming that she couldn't remember them. She also couldn't remember the exact purchase price of any of the properties and even the outstanding mortgage payments. Asked why she wasn't registered as a joint owner of these properties, she shed tears and pleaded ignorance as to the true legal consequences of such an omission. "I thought that since he was my husband, any property registered in his name also belonged to me. I didn't know that the title deeds should also bear my name. I certainly did not think of it that way," she said amid sobs.

"I put it to you, Mrs Ndeda, that you are misleading the court. The truth is that you never spent any of your money for the purchase of LR No. 209/10896/KILELESHWA therefore you had no reason to be registered as its owner."

"I don't lie. What I have said is the truth," Sembe insisted.

When Mr Kambero insisted on asking the same question in relation to all the other properties, the judge intervened. "You have made your point, Mr Kambero, could we move on, please?" the judge said. This brought the cross-examination to an end. Wanja told the judge that she had no other witness and thus closed the case for the applicant.

Amu took the stand soon thereafter. After taking the prerequisite oath, he gave his name, place of work and his relationship to the applicant. Then, Amu was guided through a thorough elucidation of the process by which he acquired the properties in question. As for the Kileleshwa house, he narrated how he secured a loan from his employer, which he used as the deposit towards the purchase of the house. The balance of the purchase price was financed through a mortgage that he has since been repaying without the help of his wife. Then, he produced all the documents including the receipts

of money paid to the lawyers, the title deeds, the receipts of mortgage repayments, his salary slips evidencing deductions, all of which were in his name. He did the same for the Kisumu property, the farms in Lambwe and Awendo, and the Kayole plot. On cross-examination, Wanja laboured to establish that her client had made some monetary contribution to the upkeep of the house even if the same did not go directly toward the purchase of the property. Amu vehemently denied this. When it seemed fruitless, she decided to concentrate on household items and the car. Amu couldn't remember exactly how each item in the house was acquired so Wanja could have scored some points here. As for the Toyota that Sembe was driving, he was categorical about having raised the entire purchase price without her help. In the end, it seemed hopeless to get him to accept his wife's contribution. With a few questions to clarify a point here and there, Mr Kambero concluded the respondent's case. Amu was asked to step down from the witness stand. Justice Raker asked the lawyers to file written submissions in lieu of oral arguments since it was just about six o'clock. He also ordered that judgment would be on notice.

Sironga Golf Hotel in Limuru is not a place known to many people. Although situated about twenty-three kilometres away from the city of Nairobi on the main Nairobi-Nakuru Highway, it was still a preferred venue for Europeans and wealthy Africans seeking to offload their stress on a countryside game of golf or to clinch business deals. Formerly known as "The Manor", the hotel's name changed in 1964 when the late Njoroge Mbutia acquired it from the government. That was after Lord Whitfield, its original owner, was declared *persona non grata* and expelled from the country. Whitfield was an arrogant ex-colonial administrator who had named his dogs after Kenya's independence leaders. Unfortunately for Whitfield, it was during the time when the government was implementing what was then known as "Africanisation"; an ambiguous policy of economic mobilisation that was meant to divest businesses from foreigners and give the same to the indigenous people. Thus, when his workers brought that fact to the attention

of the government, the then Vice-President ordered his expulsion from the country and the subsequent nationalisation of all his property.

Among the beneficiaries of the “Africanisation” policy was Njoroge Mbuthia, then a local politician and a Mau Mau veteran. He was allotted the property on which the hotel and Golf Club stood, as though the land was a piece of cloth. Being an astute businessman, Mbuthia ran the hotel and Golf Club, retaining the same clientele and staff, and slowly expanding it to its current state. Upon his death in 1974, control of the business passed to his son, Peter Mbuthia, who, at the time, had just finished his studies at the University of London. Mbuthia was a placid sort of fellow and very handsome. While in London, he had married Kenta, a Ugandan, and they had two daughters; Wanja and Tami. When he finished his studies, Kenta refused to come back to Kenya with him so he wrested the girls from her and flew home. He settled in Limuru and took over his father’s business. Later, he remarried a beautiful hostess but the marriage hardly lasted two years. With no wife or younger children to dote over, his daughters became the centre of his life. He sent them to international schools in Nairobi and, after taking the British “A” levels examinations, he took them abroad. Tami, the elder one, went to U.S.A. and, later, became a singer. Wanja studied Law at McGill University in Canada then came back to start a legal practice in Nairobi.

Justice Wishbourne Raker was introduced to Sironga Golf Hotel and its owner, the late Njoroge Mbuthia, in 1972 when he first came to Kenya. Since then, he had become a valued customer and a family friend. The late Mbuthia even introduced him to a lady, Scholastica Mumbi, who became his trusted acquaintance. When Mbuthia died and his son Peter became the boss, this friendship continued. Actually, it was because of the Mbuthias that his problems with alcohol were not a matter of public knowledge. Sometimes, he would get so drunk that he would pee and defecate on himself. The Mbuthias would ensure that he was cleaned up and given a place to sleep. The next day, they would take him to Nairobi in a family Mercedes or arrange for his official driver to pick him up.

When his daughter, Wanja, was admitted to the roll of advocates and licensed to practice law, Peter asked his friend, Justice Raker, to guide her in the ways of the profession. It was an unusual request

given that the girl and the judge were on opposite sides of the profession but, nevertheless, understandable in view of the judge's long-term relationship with the family. But, this alone, couldn't have fostered the closeness that subsequently developed between the lawyer and the judge. Mainly, it was due to the lawyer taking deliberate and proactive steps in that direction as well as the judge's vulnerability. At first, Wanja recruited Scholastica into her coterie of friends then she began taking her to Dubai for shopping trips, to Mombasa for holidays and, generally, spending time together at the judge's Rose Gardens residence. In time, Scholastica became Wanja's mouthpiece, whenever she wanted a favour from the judge or just needed some good advice. No wonder the judge had heard of the case of *Ndeda Versus Ndeda* long before the matter appeared on his docket and without Wanja ever mentioning anything of the sort to him.

It wasn't *Ndeda Versus Ndeda* or anything to do with his work that was on Justice Wishbourne Raker's mind this Friday afternoon when he drove into the Hotel. He needed to see Wanja so that she could talk to Scholastica and convince her to come back home. He knew that Wanja and Scholastica were good friends and there were no secrets between them. He was convinced that if anybody knew where Scholastica was at that very moment, it was Wanja. This is why he had called her in the morning and arranged to meet her at her at Sironga. He knew, too, that their meeting could be suspicious therefore he was prepared to take utmost care to conceal it. This was the only thing he could do since he needed Scholastica back and nothing was going to stop him from seeking help.

He found Wanja and another woman, later introduced to him as Georgina Wamugunda, hunched in a private booth far removed from the main restaurant and bar area. Wanja was doing all the talking, while the woman was nodding in agreement. When they saw him the conversation ended abruptly and the woman hurriedly left. She went to another booth, talked to a white man with grey hair and, together, they walked towards the lobby. Wanja rose to welcome him. "Good afternoon, my Lord," she said.

"Good afternoon, Miss Peters. Thank you for agreeing to come. I know the risks but I just have to talk to you," he said apologetically.

"The pleasure is all mine, my Lord."

“May I get you something to drink?”

“No, no. I will be fine. As a matter of fact, I have a business dinner appointment later tonight and I don’t want to be rude to my host.”

“Well, in that case, I had better get to the point so that you may attend your appointment in time. You see, it is about Scholastica. Last night, we had a small disagreement and she left. I was wondering whether you might know where she is?”

“No, I don’t. What was the disagreement about if I may ask?”

“You see lately she was concerned about us registering our marriage and me taking some of the bride price to her parents. I must say that I have been a little preoccupied so I have not found the time to do this.”

“Hmmm.”

“So, last night, she started talking about how men mistreat women and how a union needed to be secured. Then, she mentioned something about a client of yours, and one issue led to another until we couldn’t communicate anymore.”

“My Lord, Scholastica may have been talking about my client in the case that you heard on Tuesday. I think that it might be unprofessional to discuss it now since your judgment is still pending. All I may tell you is that Scholastica knows the lady and has been assisting her with many things. Maybe she is just as upset as my client is right now, but that is neither here or there. I hope that this does not affect your judgment. You see, for me she is just a client.”

“She knew I was hearing the case. Why didn’t she tell me that they were that close? I could have transferred the case to another judge. Does she want me to lose my job or what?”

“I don’t know. That could be something that you and she can resolve. All I can say is that she may be upset because of someone else.”

“Strange!”

“Yeah, very strange. But my Lord, no harm was done. I will try to get her back to you. I will find out whether she went to Muranga and, if she did, I will go there this weekend and bring her back. You should promise that, this time, you will try to formalise your relationship.”

“Oh, I will.”

“That is settled then. Once I bring her here, I will probably arrange for her to call you.”

“Thanks, Miss Peters, I appreciate that.”

“I must go now. Have a good evening, Sir.”

With that, she picked up her purse and went into the lobby. But, instead of leaving, she took the elevator and went to the second floor. In room 204 B, her friend, Scholastica, was waiting. “It is all taken care of, sweetheart,” she said while closing the door behind her. “You will get your marriage certificate and I will get my judgment.”

Chapter Seventeen

IT WAS EARLY May. The long rains were wreaking havoc all around the country and there was rampant talk of another *El Nino*. While the government was bracing itself to deal with the floods and famine, the majority of citizens merely succumbed to the excruciating preponderance of the cold and damp as well as the destruction all around them. The heavy storms and wild gales of wind brought down buildings, uprooted electricity and telephone poles and swept away bridges thereby rendering parts of the country inaccessible. Amu was in his Hurlingham apartment, listening to the radio and pondering the vicissitudes of his daily life. In the news, there was a report about a collapsed bridge on the main Mombasa-Nairobi highway, which had virtually cut off communication between the two cities. It was unlike any other rainy season that he had witnessed, not because the rains were any more severe than the previous year or any other year for that matter, but because this year, the season had bestowed on him more anguish and vexation than he had ever experienced. When the season began in late March, just around the time he was in court, he hoped that, come May, he would already have a car so he would not have to suffer the torment of walking in the rain and riding in the overcrowded buses. But, here he was, two months later, still procrastinating, his conscience ill at ease about any major financial commitment.

His indecision was probably connected to the case. Thus, when Justice Raker announced that he would render his decision in the middle of May, his plans to purchase a car became not only contingent upon the outcome of the case, but the least of his worries as well. Now, he was preoccupied with how to deal with the possible consequences of the judgment. If he lost, he might appeal the judgment. This would cast on him a further spell of disquiet and abashment. If he won, then, of course, he would embark on a more

serious fiscal programme. He would urgently appropriate the proceeds from the rent which were being deposited in the court, to help defray the mortgage arrears and, maybe, buy a car. Then, he would develop the other properties and even make further investments. He also planned to get involved in the lives of his daughters and his son. This meant that he had to deal with Sembe, a truly cautious undertaking that, of late, had become more sublime in his thoughts and inviting in its appeal.

The sight of his wife the last time they were in court still preyed on his mind. Although calm and composed, the melancholy in her eyes was all too pervasive. There was something in her that evinced a probable disconnect between her action and her inner desires. And yet the will to overcome the dissonance seemed so entrapped in a sea of anger and distrust. She needed something that she wasn't getting and it was neither property nor money. In court, she had said the things that she was expected to say, but hardly what came from her heart. How could somebody be so in need inwardly yet, outwardly, so disdainfully arrogant? Since she had left their home, he had always considered her belligerent, sanctimonious and full of vengeance. Now, he was thinking differently. May be he had not really taken the time to understand his wife, apprehend her fears and even contemplate her painful endurance of the many days of unspeakable loneliness and joyless gaiety when he was away consorting with Beth. Perhaps, if he did this, he could understand where her anger was coming from. Perhaps, he could even discover a whole different Sembe—the Sembe whom he had fallen in love with in the days of his youth.

This realisation wrought upon him a wanton sense of need that pointed in one direction only—that of redeeming his lost love. But, he had squandered all the opportunities, even when her candour and affability allowed him to make amends. When he promised to visit her in Mamboleo, he should have gone. When she went to his home, repaired the house and even asked him to bring Moses to Nairobi, he should have listened. But, pride clouded his judgment—the same pride, which according to a *Luo* folktale made the rabbit humiliate the spider when both went on a journey to heaven. The spider upset by the mistreatment, abandoned his friend and came back to earth but not before folding his web, which was the ladder

they used to get to heaven in the first place. With no ladder, the rabbit had to jump from heaven but he fell on the ground so hard that he turned into a dry fish. Amu's fall had begun on the very day the marriage broke down. Sembe, like the spider, had provided a web to which he could cling and then negotiate his journey back to normality. But, he had spurned her overtures at every turn, driving the woman to the brink of desperation. Now, the web had been folded and he had to figure out how to jump back to earth.

He rose from his chair, turned off the radio and walked to the bedroom. His thirst for *Chang'aa*, the local brew, was making him feel feverish. Lately, he had discovered that *Chang'aa* made him feel a lot better than beer. It was like an aphrodisiac, soothing and empowering, just what he needed to deal with the issues that were swarming his mind. He put on his hooded jacket and walked to the window. The wind had subsided and the rain reduced to a drizzle, a perfect opportunity to dash to Mama Nitilie's *Chang'aa* kiosk in Ndondosha Lane Seven. He stood there momentarily, gazing at the dark clouds forming in the east. There was going to be another storm in the night and, unless he got to Ndondosha in time, he might never touch a drink until tomorrow. He hurried to the door, turned off the lights and left.

It was the first business day of the week and the stolid hangover from a weekend gone past was evident in many people's faces. Unlike other judges of the High Court who would summon litigants and their lawyers into chambers in the afternoons to give rulings or judgments, Justice Wishbourne Raker preferred to give his in the morning and in an open court. That morning, the court was jam-packed as usual. Amu being familiar with the arrangements quickly found a seat. He scanned the crowd for Sembe or her brother, Tim. For some bizarre reason, Amu had anticipated seeing her again. Sembe wasn't in court but her lawyer was. Suddenly, he found himself wondering why the woman did not come. Perhaps, she was ill or out of town or, maybe, she was just not interested in the case anymore.

When the case was called, both lawyers responded and the judge scribbled something in his notes. Immediately, he began to read the judgment. After summing up all the evidence adduced at the hearing, the judge found that Sembe's contribution to the acquisition of the properties was significant. The extent of contribution, the judge opined, wasn't the mere aggregate of shillings and cents spent directly towards the purchase, but included the unquantifiable peace of mind that she provided to her husband during the tenure of the marriage. Citing a number of local and English cases, he found that both Sembe and Amu had made equal contribution and must, therefore, be entitled to half of the interests in all the properties. He ordered Amu, in whose name the properties were registered, to surrender half interest in all of the properties and to provide an inventory of all the rents that he had accrued from these, from the date of their official separation. Since the rent for the Kileleshwa property was being deposited in court, the judge ordered the same to be released to the parties in equal proportion, but subject to other liabilities including the outstanding mortgage payments and maintenance. As for the car that Sembe had retained, the judge found that, although Amu had purchased the vehicle, he had passed it to his wife as a gift and therefore he had forfeited his right of ownership. Lastly, the judge declined to make any orders as to the costs of the suit and left each party to bear its own expenses.

After reading the judgment, the judge left the court room. Amu clasped his arms around his knees and found them trembling under his chin with restrained rage. He moved closer to Mr Kambero and looked him straight in the face. "We have lost, haven't we? All the things that I have worked for! Tell me that we can still appeal. Tell me... Come on!"

"Let us talk somewhere else," the lawyer said as he gathered his books and papers.

Amu followed his lawyer to the hallway.

"Yes, we can appeal. We have fourteen days to do so. I will prepare the papers right away when we get to the office," Kambero said valiantly.

But Amu was lost for words. His chest was heavy, his mouth dry and his stomach churned out of desperation and anger. He couldn't believe that for all the financial struggles he had gone through to

purchase and remodel the house, Sembe was now colluding with the court to rob him of what was his—all in the name of matrimony. What kind of laws were these courts upholding anyway, if they could sanction such an aberration from the basic norms of property ownership?

“I do not understand it. How can we have the same rights to the property which I bought without even a single cent from the woman? How can it be? Is it really the law that a man and woman have equal shares in all property acquired during marriage?”

“No. That is not the law, Amu. The law is that they are entitled to shares commensurate with their contribution,” the lawyer said.

“Now, tell me, did the woman produce any single receipt or bank slip or statement or even a cheque counterfoil to show that she made any payment towards the house? Did she? Nothing! I bought the property and paid for its mortgage, year after year, with no financial contribution from her at all. Even the alterations and renovations, I paid for all of them. Not a single penny came from her pocket. Now, tell me, is it fair?”

“It is not fair but you see the person who determines the levels of contributions is the judge and he might be wrong, which is why we must take it to another judge...”

“Who might also be wrong because I don’t know what kind of charm that woman uses on these judges,” Amu paused. He felt a strange simmering pain in his lower abdomen. Usually he felt this sensation whenever he was upset about something. His hands also started to shake as questions made their way to his throat, but the words he was about to speak tangled around his tongue like a cord.

There was little talking as the two men made their way to the Starline Coffee House on Banda Street.

“Look, Amu, I don’t like the judge’s opinion any more than you do, not his finding on the issue of contribution or his analysis of the evidence,” Kambero said as soon as they took their seats. “This is why we must strategise about our next move. We must not lose our heads. At the moment, they may have won the battle but the war is still on.”

“I don’t think these court cases are getting us anywhere,” Amu said. “I think that we should just forget about it.”

“No. I think you should look for some money so that we file an appeal. This is what I think and it is the logical thing to do in these circumstances,” the lawyer insisted.

Amu did not have the strength to argue with the lawyer. He promised to think about it. Deep down, he was wounded and nothing that the lawyer could have said or done, would break the tide of ineptitude that was rising within him. He felt completely hopeless and totally defeated. If anything about him still made sense, it was his nose through which he breathed and his mouth through which he gulped alcohol. The rest of his body could disappear and he would have no regrets. He questioned himself on several fronts, reviewing all the decisions he had made in the past and concluded that, maybe, nothing could have changed the outcome of his life. Perhaps, everything had been predestined to happen exactly the way it did.

Amu went back to the office. He could have taken the day off but decided against it. Perhaps, it was the desire to see Sally. Of late, she had developed the rare talent of listening to his blabbering and comforting him whenever he was in any emotional pain. Hitherto, they had been content to limit their secret sexual rendezvous in the office. But, their relationship, no longer encumbered by his marriage, became even stronger. He openly displayed his affection for her in moments when they were together and encouraged her to do the same. As though her marriage did not matter, Sally was a regular visitor to his house in Kileleshwa and had been to the Hurlingham Apartment more than twice. He was grateful for the relationship. He needed to talk to somebody like her today.

As he entered his office, he found Sally leaning over the office table, looking very distraught. “What is it, dear?” he asked, moving closer to her. She did not answer. Instead she lifted her head. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. He held her by the waist and led her to his office. He made her sit on the sofa then he opened the window and sat beside her. She looked terrible. He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped her face. Then, he kissed her tenderly. She started to cry.

“What is it, dear?” he asked again.

“It is my husband,” she said amid sobs. “He came home drunk last night and started it.”

“Did you two have a quarrel?”

“Not exactly.”

“What did he do exactly? Did he beat you?”

“No, he just said that I am no good for him. He kicked me out of the house last night. I went over to the neighbour’s and they talked to him but he wouldn’t listen. They gave me a place to sleep. This morning, he threw all my things out and told me to go.”

“Did he give you the car?”

“Yes. He put all my clothes in the car and asked me to go forever. He does not want me. I don’t know what is wrong with him. He is mad. Now, I have nowhere to go,” she was now crying out loud.

“That fool had no right to treat you in that way after all what you have done for him. Well, why don’t we go and talk about this somewhere else? I am sure we can find a solution to all these problems.”

Amu took her to his apartment in Hurlingham. After she settled in, he took her car and went down to The Closet, hoping to find Cosmas. Finding none of his close friends at the bar, he immersed himself in beer, caring little that the weekend was still far off. When he did not get any buzz from beer, he drove to Kenyatta Market, parked the car outside a *Nyama Choma* joint and crossed on foot to Mama Nitilie’s place in Ndondosha Lane Seven.

When Wanja left Mr Justice Wishborne Raker’s court-room, she drove directly to Mla Chake restaurant in Westlands. Inside one of the booths, John Kisa was waiting, a glass of gin and tonic sitting on a low table in front of him. He was wearing a loose jogging suit and a pair of white gym shoes. His shapely figure was comfortably tucked into a bamboo chair. When he rose to greet her, she caught the scent of his cologne. He chuckled and grinned like a teenager, obviously elated that she had come.

“How did it go, my learned friend?” he asked with a smile all over his face.

“Quite fine,” she said while sitting down on a chair next to him. She put the heavy brief case next to her and adjusted the hem of her skirt. “Mr Ndeda is no longer the sole owner of LR No.209/10896/KILELESHWA.”

“Congratulations on the good work! I will drink to that. I guess it is now my turn to arrange for the valuation and the money?”

“Not so fast, John. There are still a few court procedures that have to be attended to.”

“What are they?”

“First, we will have to wait until the appeal period expires. They were given fourteen days to do so. Hopefully, Mr Ndeda doesn’t appeal. His lawyer, being whom he is, young, energetic and so eager to make a mark in the profession, he might be spinning an appeal now, as we speak.”

“Hmmm... I hope not.”

“If they do, then it means another period of a lull, perhaps a year or two. The court of Appeal is very slow. It has more work than it can possibly handle. Also those clerks at its registry, they are all difficult to deal with.”

“That will not do us any good. I will just have to see what we can do.”

“I will leave that to you.”

“If they don’t file an appeal within the stipulated time, we will execute the judgment in the normal way. Then, we have to settle the terms of sale...”

“What is that?”

“It is a procedure through which the court ensures that the interest of the owner of a property is protected. But, it is not a big deal. Without having filed an appeal, I doubt that they could be interested in the terms of sale. Let us wait and see what happens within fourteen days.”

“I guess so,” John said a gleam of understanding in his eyes. “We shall wait if that’s what justice requires.”

She had a premonition that John was going to do something to ensure that no appeal was filed. She knew that he was the sort of person who would never take no for an answer. He might, as he did with Amu Ndeda’s property documents, find a way to corrupt the lawyers. But, whatever he did, as long as it wasn’t with her direct acquiescence, was fine with her. Although he had recruited her into his scheme, she still had sense enough to protect herself.

“I have to leave because I have an appointment with my father in Limuru.”

“Can’t you stay much longer, sweetheart? I could order some food.”

“No thanks. I have to run.”

Amu began to lose interest in the Kileleshwa property a few days after the judgment. Although he had consented to the filing of an appeal, he was reluctant to pay the money that Kambero had requested. He kept promising the lawyer that he would do so, but he never did. Instead, he took to more drinking, especially *Chang’aa* at Mama Nitilie. It was as though he had given up the fight. The lawyer, too busy with his other clients, was never too keen to have the papers filed in court within the time allowed. Thus, fourteen days elapsed without Amu or his lawyer taking legal steps to stop Wanja from enforcing the court order.

A day after the period allowed for appeal elapsed, Wanja began the process of selling the house. By letter, she offered Amu the chance to purchase Sembe’s interest in the property. According to the ruling of the court, this amounted to half the value of the house. Wanja had done her homework well. She had obtained a valuation report which placed the value of the property at twelve million shillings. From the contents of her letter, there was no doubt that her offer was designed to obscure her true intentions and to scare off Amu. She knew he had no money, judging from the difficulty he had in paying his other court mandated obligations. Where on earth could he possibly come up with six million shillings? To add insult to injury, she indicated that the offer was only good for one week.

Kambero summoned Amu to his office to discuss the offer.

“You don’t get it, man,” Amu told his lawyer when he arrived. “She can have it all. I really don’t care.”

Kambero shook his head. He was having none of that. “Amu, my job, as your lawyer, is to advise you. Right now, you might think you don’t care but five, ten years from now, you might care. That is when you might look back at today and wish that we had this discussion.”

“Even if I care, where can I get six million bucks? You know how my finances are right now?”

“Well, I did not say you get six million bucks right away. All I said was that we do not close all the doors to discussion. You see, we could still find our own person to value the property and then we can renegotiate. This may take a while thereby giving you time to look for some money.”

“Look, my friend, I have had enough of that woman. For now, I just want to go home. I cannot pay six million bucks or any other money. They can sell the house if they so wish. I have tried so hard but, each time, I fail. Perhaps, this is how it was meant to be and nothing or nobody can change it.”

The process of preparing the property for sale was done with utmost speed. Within two weeks of writing to Amu, Wanja took out execution proceedings in which she asked the court to allow the sale of the Kileleshwa property by way of a public auction. After execution was ordered, she dutifully proceeded to settle the terms of sale. Ideally, a property of that value needed a reserve price. Also, the procedural requirement that the seller makes a public announcement of the intention to sell, either through an advertisement in the newspaper or by way of notices in public places, should have been inserted in the terms. But, since the registered owner wasn’t represented before the registrar on the day of the hearing, the terms of sale, the omissions notwithstanding, were passed without much ado. Within one month, a buyer was found and the property was sold. Final accounts were sent to Amu immediately thereafter. They indicated that the property had been sold for six million and after paying all the debts including the mortgage and the outstanding rates and rents, the sum due to both parties was only eight hundred thousand. Amu’s entitlement of four hundred thousand was further deducted to cater for the arrears of maintenance and costs. The balance due to Amu was only one hundred thousand shillings, a sum sent to Mr Otieno Kambero immediately after the sale and which sum the lawyer retained as part of his legal fees.

Amu could have dismissed his loss of the property as just another chapter in his already convoluted book of worldly miseries if a man called Wahome did not call him one afternoon to complain

about the sloppy manner in which the sale had been handled. Unaware that Amu was not involved in the process, he rained accusations at him.

“Were you and your lawyer really serious about selling the property or you were just joking?” he asked.

“What do you mean, Mr Wahome?”

“I knew from some very reliable source that your property was valued at twelve million. I was offering eight million. You people ignored my offer and sold it to that Ugandan for six million! You people don’t know anything about business and you are not even patriotic!”

According to Wahome, the buyer of his property was John Kisa, a Ugandan and the owner of Mbale Enterprises. John was also Ayugi’s husband, and that really troubled Amu. It meant that Sembe had made a deal to rob him of his title through the façade of the court and the divorce process. She was masking her retention of the property by purporting to sell the same to her friend. This was fraud and, since she had involved the lawyer in her legerdemain, both of them were guilty.

Amu denied complicity in the sale and put all the blame on his wife’s lawyer. He comforted Wahome by informing him that he would investigate the matter and if there was any foul play, he would take appropriate steps to ensure justice. He promised Wahome that, should the property become available again, he would be the first to know. In any event, Amu would still call him later to inform of the results of his investigation. For whatever it was worth, he thanked Wahome for bringing the matter to his attention and promised to call him again in the near future.

Immediately thereafter, Amu called Cosmas who confirmed that the lawyer had acted irregularly. Cosmas also advised him to file a complaint against the lawyer both with the Law Society of Kenya and the police. He knew Cosmas was right but he needed proper evidence and documentation to support his case. This required some investigation. Amu knew of no better person who could dig into the matter and uncover the filth, than Mish. They had not talked since the deal with the judge but, knowing Mish, nothing would have regaled his ego more than an opportunity to repair his relationship with Amu and, at the same time, uncover the heinous

deals of some of his colleagues. Amu traced him by phone and, when he finally got hold of him, he agreed to nose around and, later, advise his friend of the proper legal recourse.

Sembe walked into Rajabu's hair salon on Moi Avenue to have new braids and to catch the latest gossip about Amu. Although their relationship was technically over, she was still keen to know how life was treating the father of her children. She was particularly interested in the so-called marriage plans that her husband was allegedly making with Beth. According to Ayugi, it was a matter known all over town. There was this girl, Rhoda Adhis, who was working at EAP, but did part-time work at Rajabu's place. If there was one person who would have the details of this planned marriage, it would be Rhoda. Rhoda knew all about what was going on in and around town and was more than eager to share. Her employment at two places widened her net for the collection and distribution of gossip. Rajabu did not mind her. After all, Rhoda's reputation did not hurt the business. This afternoon, Sembe found Rhoda cleaning her booth in preparation for work. She was happy to be her first customer. Rhoda's face swelled with excitement when Sembe approached her.

"Hello, Sem, I have not seen you for quite a while. Did somebody tell me you were abroad?"

"Oh, yes. I was in Italy for only three days," she responded with some air of importance. "How are you, Rhoda? I am happy to see you."

"I am doing well, Sem. It is only a man that I am missing. Happen to find some lonely white men over there in Italy who could do with my sort?"

Rhoda's remark provoked such protracted laughter.

"Don't even go there. If I found one, I would keep him for myself—I am also looking remember? Why a white man, Rhoda? There are so many men here in Kenya.

"You know, I don't trust black men anymore. I can only marry one if I don't love him so that when he leaves me, I am not hurt."

“Hmm! By the way, Rhoda, how is my ex doing over there at EAP?” Sembe asked. She knew Rhoda would definitely have some information, however far-fetched it may be.

“More than fine. More than fine, I tell you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t know? Don’t try and pull my leg sweetie.”

“I don’t know. Tell me.”

“You mean you don’t know that he has a *Ndogo Ndogo*?”

“He has acquired one? Who is the lucky lady?”

“The usual.”

“You mean Beth?”

“Nooo. What do you mean Beth?” she said standing still and turning to look at her customer in the face. “Beth is history. What I heard the other day is that she is married to the District Commissioner in Kisumu as a second wife. Can you imagine that your man went there in January trying to get his son and to evict her from the property? Let me tell you, sweetie, the man was chased by the police all the way up to Nakuru. If he wasn’t driving a big car he would probably be in jail right now.”

Prolonged laughter ensued, drawing other women into the discussion.

“Yeah. I heard that too,” Tabitha, who had just come in, interjected. “My friend in Kisumu told me that Amu tried to fight her in the office and that is when the police were called.”

“He tried to fight her?” Sembe asked.

“He went to see her in the office to ask for his son and she lambasted him. That is when he turned violent, so I heard,” Tabitha confirmed.

“I told you that Beth is not in the picture anymore,” Rhoda said.

“So, which lady were you talking about?” Sembe asked.

“The usual office slut—Sally. Yes! She moved into his apartment a few days ago.”

“What? I thought Sally was married to that footballer?”

“Yeah. They broke up and she went straight into Amu’s open arms.”

“So, is Sally now living with him in his apartment in Hurlingham?”

“Oh, yes. But I don’t like the way she boasts these days. When he becomes the General Manager, that woman will be walking over everyone,” Rhoda lamented.

A few more details about Sally were spoken, most of which were unsavoury but, nevertheless, befitting the nature of the conversation. Sembe was disappointed at the news but tried not to show it. When her hair was done, she left the Salon in a hurry. Ideally, the news about Amu living with another woman should not have disturbed her. She had filed for divorce and had consented to an order of legal separation. On all counts, he was free to cohabit with whomever he pleased, provided he did not enter into a legal marriage. But, that was as far as the law of the courts was concerned. There was, in her view, the law of hearts. In her heart, Amu was still her husband, the father of her children and nothing was going to change all of that. When she learnt of his flirtations with Sally, she thought it would eventually fizzle out. He was bound to realise that a married woman was no good for him. Although unwilling to admit it, her innermost feelings still had love for Amu. The fifteen years of marriage had imprinted on her a certain kind of life that was simply incomplete without him. She was, in thought rather than deed, unwilling to bring down the curtain and begin a new life.

When she left the parking lot opposite the Agha Khan Walk, she drove straight to Kambilamoshi. She wanted to talk to Gladys about Amu. She wanted some advice on how she could get him back; how she could convince him that everything that she did was out of desperation. She was utterly disgusted with herself especially when she remembered her performance in court a few months ago. Her motive then, was to inflict as much harm as possible on him because of Beth. But, what Ayugi had told her wasn't exactly true. Amu had no intention whatsoever of marrying Beth and was only trying to get his child. Was Ayugi deliberately misleading her or was it an honest mistake? Whatever it was, a big lie had been told and she, being stupid, had acted on it. Now, she had driven her husband, lover and soulmate, away from her.

At Kambilamoshi, she sat in the car momentarily unable to gather enough strength to go inside. Mostly, it was the concern that Gladys, like many who had derided any court involvement, may be less supportive now that she had chosen a path of destruction. On top of everything she was going through right now, the least she needed to see was a face enshrouded with a deep sense of *déjà vu*. The last time they talked, Gladys had been more than succinct about her

views on the marriage and the courts. “Sem”, she had said, “the best marriage is impossible to achieve. All parties make mistakes, and conflicts are all part of the game. How else do you grow strong? In my lifetime, I have seen so many marriages collapse. I hate to see yours go down the drain as well and it will certainly be so if you persist in solving all your problems through the court.” Then, she had promised Gladys that she would try to be calm, but she couldn’t speak for Amu. “Do you want me to talk to him?” Gladys had asked but she couldn’t let her. She was just not ready for another reconciliation bid after what had happened with Aunt Didi and *Dani*.

That was just after she got custody of the children. She did not tell her about the case she had filed regarding the Kileleshwa house. It was deliberate as much as a product of her confusion. At first, she did not want her relatives to know she was after Amu’s property because, as far as she was concerned, that would depict her as an avaricious woman who did not care about anything else in a marriage except money and wealth. Later, she couldn’t make up her mind whether talking to anybody was a good idea given her mixed feelings and actions. Despite all these, she was certain that Gladys knew as much as any of her friends about the case and its outcome. What Gladys probably did not know was that Ayugi had lied to her about Beth and it was for this reason that she had participated in the hearing. She was still convinced that had Ayugi not come to her house that Sunday evening and told her about Beth, she would never have gone to court. Perhaps, Gladys would never believe this and, even worse, think of her as an insolent being—a person bent on blaming other people for her own poor decisions. That was a chance she was prepared to take. In any event, she was used to being honest with herself no matter how deplorable her intimations were to other people. This was why she had been able to overcome the many obstacles and sexual stereotypes in the civil service. Deep down in her consciousness, she began to feel a little tinge of excitement at the prospect of being in command of her situation and the possibility of emerging from despondency unscathed. Her mood lightened to the splendour of the afternoon sunshine and, by the time she made it to the door, she was quite relaxed and cheerful and only remotely concerned about her marital troubles.

Gladys welcomed Sembe with so much delight, hugging and smiling, and even when she lamented her disappearance and loss of weight, it was in such a pleasant tone of voice that she couldn't help but smile in return. Sembe had not expected anything like this, nor did she know quite how to handle it. She sat numbly on the sofa drowning, in guilt. Gladys, effervescent and radiant, darted to the kitchen and brought a soda and a floral glass, which she set on a coffee near her guest. She went back and brought another bottle for herself. Then, she smoothed out the voile *Leso* wrapped around her waist and sat on the sofa. "Sem, it has been a while since you came to see us," she said. "Was it yesterday or the day before...? I can't remember, when your brother was asking about you."

"I have been busy. Work, the children and all the mess in my life..."

"What is going on in your life?"

"A lot. After I got custody of my children, I did not want to have anything to do with Amu but Ayugi and my lawyer kept on pushing me until I agreed to file another case against him. I know you think I am crazy but..."

"A case in court? For what?"

"Well, it was for property. According to the lawyer, when a couple separates, each of them is entitled to claim interest in the property bought during the marriage. I didn't want to claim anything from Amu and I didn't need any of his money. I have a house and a reasonably good job. When the case was about to be heard, Ayugi came to my house with her husband and told me that Amu was planning to marry Beth and was selling the house and all our properties in Nairobi. I was very upset because I thought that he didn't care about his daughters. The judgment was delivered a few weeks ago and Amu has been ordered to give me the property. Now, what bothers me is that it has turned out that Ayugi was lying to me. Amu had no plans to marry Beth at all."

"No. Amu never had any intentions to marry Beth. Last week, Marren was telling me a very interesting story. Do you know that cousin of theirs called Onjala who is in Kisumu?"

"Yes. The one who used to siphon money from Amu on very flimsy excuses..."

"That one. Amu had gone to seek his help in getting his son from Beth. I understand Beth is now married to Khasiani, the District Commissioner, as a second wife. When they went to her office in Milimani, she refused to talk to them. Later that night, the woman set the police on Amu. Imagine, the police showed up at Onjala's house and attempted to arrest Amu. If he did not give them a bribe of two thousand shillings and left for Nairobi that very moment, he would probably be in jail."

"So, where did this idea that he was planning to marry Beth come from?"

"I don't know. But, why are you concerned about what he does? From what you have just told me, it seems your relationship has pretty much ended. Do you still have any feelings for him?"

"He is the father of my children and nothing can change that."

"I know that, but do you still love him?"

"I don't know Gladys. I don't know. Do you find it unusual that a person can file so many cases in court against a man and still have feelings for him?"

"Yes, I do."

"I do too. But, you know, I never really wanted to divorce Amu. That was never my intention. What I wanted was some recognition—the recognition of whom I am and what I am worth in a marriage relationship. I reluctantly went along with those who thought that filing a case in court was the only way in which both Amu and I could come to the realisation that we needed to do something about the relationship. Unfortunately, it didn't work out that way. Each time we went to court, we drifted further apart. The courts have done more harm than good to this marriage."

Gladys sighed, her eyes shimmering with empathy. "Oh, Sem, I know Amu is a good man, but..." She paused, seemingly groping for the right words. "Sem, it is one thing to have feelings for somebody and another to get a reciprocal response. How do you know that Amu has any feelings for you right now?"

"I know he thinks I am a devil, which is why he is hanging out with his secretary."

"My point exactly. Perhaps it would be good for you to forget him. Did I hear about a man from coast province?"

"You must be talking about Toni. He was just a friend," Sembe said, drawing up her lower lip and pulling it over her bottom teeth.

"I don't know what to tell you, Sem. You might want to think these things over. You know, divorce is a serious matter but when two people cannot live together, there should be an opportunity for either of them to end the marriage. In your case, I think a lot has happened. If it were not so, I would have supported the idea of having the elders arbitrate the dispute between you and your husband. But, nothing is impossible. Maybe, if reconciliation is sought, even at this late hour, Amu might also be willing to reconsider his position. Maybe, he still has feelings for you, too."

"That is something I wouldn't know unless I talked to him."

"I think so. Are you going to look for him yourself or will you use an emissary?"

"I will think of something."

When she came home that night, Sembe felt piqued. She had a rare feeling of disgust, not about anything in particular but about life in general. She felt that she was being punished for some mistake that she wasn't aware of. When she couldn't find the door keys in her purse and had to run back to the car, it felt as though her world was turning upside down. Although the keys were exactly where she put them, in the purse, it took fifteen good minutes of searching to find them—a feat that couldn't have been accomplished had she not emptied all the contents of the purse on the front seat and returned them one by one. She let herself in and switched on the lights. Although it was just about nine, the girls were already asleep. She did not feel sleepy so she went into the kitchen and made a cup of cocoa. She came back to the sitting room and sat on her favourite recliner. She sipped the warm drink and closed her eyes, listening to the scraping sound of leaves and branches and the occasional barking of dogs in the neighbourhood.

When her feet felt cold, she went to her bedroom, stripped all her clothes and stood for a moment, admiring her naked body in the mirror. When she had seen enough, she walked over to the bathroom and drew a hot bath. She lay in the tub, allowing the water to soak her whole body up to her neck. Her eyes closed and her thoughts drifted into fantasy. Her eyes opened again and she traced her fingers over her face, ears and down to her neck. Her

hands moved further down to her collar bones and to the firm swelling of her breasts. She felt her nipples harden below the warm soothing water. Her body was good. She was still an attractive woman. The pleasure that came from this reassurance shook off her sombre mood.

After the bath, she shed her gown and crawled under the sheets. She made a conscious effort to find sleep but couldn't. Instead, all kinds of illusions and thoughts invaded her mind, mainly those of intimacy. The thought that Amu and she could still get together brought back the feeling of emptiness that she had to endure every night. She wasn't one who is used to sleeping alone. Even after two years of separation, she still wasn't used to sleeping in a bed all by herself. In the middle of the night, she would wake up to feel for Amu's manly body and would be distressed by the emptiness. Tonight, she clung to her pillow and, suddenly, felt very alone. Exhausted but unable to sleep, she just lay there, staring at the ceiling. Having come to terms with the fact that she shared the responsibility for some of the things that were keeping them apart, she resolved to look for Amu and seek reconciliation. She knew that her friends would be censorious of any such moves because they believed he was in the wrong. But, none of those women in *Bura* realised just how much her life was wrapped up in the marriage. The separation was hurting her emotions so badly that it was almost impossible for her to see her life attaining any measure of normality without Amu being part of it. Obviously, she couldn't continue like this, always trying to hide from pain. It was no way to live. She had to do something, and now.

Abruptly, she sat up. Drawing on reserve strength that she did not know she possessed, she snatched her purse and a coat, and dashed out to the car. It was time to confront her fears, her demons. It was time to face the truth, fight for the right for happiness, for her love. She knew roughly the location of the apartment block. It was barely a kilometre from Hurlingham shopping centre. She drove through the unmanned gate and parked outside the entrance. Her initial plan was to march straight into his flat and kick Sally out, but she shelved the idea. Such an action might have the opposite effect, that of strengthening the bond between her husband and Sally. She knew he wasn't home because it was still early. She decided to wait

for him at the gate and, when he came in, try to persuade him to come home with her. She knew he would be drunk but this did not bother her. She waited for two hours and when he did not show up, she gave up. When she got home, she went straight to her bedroom. The thought of getting him back loomed larger than life itself. If she had thought a few months ago that she would feel jealous about his affair with another woman, she would have laughed at the absurdity. But, who said that love is supposed to inspire rational thinking? She needed him and this was all that mattered. Her heart screamed until weariness overcame her tired soul and she fell asleep.

The next day was a Monday. When Sembe got to her office, she decided to call Amu. As soon as he answered the phone, she could tell he was in a bad mood. This wasn't surprising to her since she knew that he had taken to too much drinking. She hastened to convey her message. "Your daughters are asking about you, so I thought I should let you know," she told him after exchanging the pleasantries about the weather and their health.

"Well, what can I do about that now?"

"I just thought you might want to see them," she said as politely as she possibly could. "Can I bring them along to your place or would you rather come home? ...Whatever you decide, really."

"You took them away from me and then you sold their house Sembe. Exactly how do you expect me to deal with that?" he said curtly.

"Look, Amu, I just called to tell you about the children. That is all".

"But it is all connected, baby, it is all connected."

"Well if you don't want to see them, that's fine with me. After all, you may be planning to have other children with your new bride."

"What do you mean new bride?"

"Sally. Has she not moved into your apartment?"

"Oh, so it is about Sally? Look, she has not moved in with me. She is temporarily there while she is looking for a house. Anyway what business is it of yours? You also have that tall man. What is his name? Er...er...er...Toni. We are doing fine in our separate lives, baby. Marry him tomorrow and invite me to the wedding."

His amusement added to her frustration. "Toni has not moved in with me neither does he sleep in my house," she retorted. "I have

morals. Let me tell you, Amu, you are making a big mistake with that woman, Sally.”

“Since when did you become my mother? Look, I have to go. Please don’t call me again if you have nothing to tell me.”

The rage in his voice paralysed her.

After he talked to his wife, Amu felt a mixture of frustration and regret. He was frustrated because he was unable to convey his true feelings to her. Despite everything he had said or done up to this point, he could say, in all honesty, that he still loved her. So, why the anger? He loosened his tie, cast his eyes up to the ceiling and then down to the papers on his desk. He breathed heavily, stood up and walked to the window. Outside, a queue of job seekers and contract workers was beginning to form. He could see Kinuthia and the guard from Wells Fargo moving about to ensure orderliness. He came back to his seat, bowed his head and closed his eyes.

In the aftermath of the court ruling and the sale of the house, he struggled to keep his sanity. Like a cat whose whiskers had been trimmed, he traipsed through life without any sense of purpose, avoiding any meaningful pursuit of solutions to problems and choosing instead to let events take their own course. But, this did not shield him any better from the tribulations that continued to rock his life. Paradoxically, what kept him going was the vain hope that, one day, he and his family might be reunited. He dreamed about Sembe and the girls now more often than before. Sometimes, he even entertained the thought of going to see her but he could not get over fact that it was she who had sold the matrimonial home. More than anything else, his soul was tormented by the feeling that, now, he had nothing to show for the many years of work and the financial struggles he had gone through.

When he came to the realisation that the sale of his house could have been unprofessionally conducted, he was thoroughly upset. Indeed, Mish had discovered some very damaging information about the whole thing. Apparently, the property was sold to a company belonging to John Kisa, a Ugandan with many business interests in Kenya. According to Mish, John Kisa and Wanja Peters were friends

or business colleagues. They had known each other since their college days at McGill University in Canada. Amu never divulged to Mish the full information about his wife's closeness to the Kisas, a fact that could have encouraged him to dig deeper and, instead, he sought the help of another investigative mind. Mish was, in his view a bit shaky and had the propensity to sell the information behind his back for some quick gains. He was bitten, so now, he was twice shy. This is why he called Stephen Wellington Maxwell Obuya and narrated his story to him. Obuya's investigation revealed grave injustices and serious violations of the rules of professional conduct on the part of Wanja Peters. While the matter seemed serious and the lawyer risked losing her professional licence, there wasn't the remotest chance that he would get his property back. Upon Obuya's advice, he put the hounds of justice on the trail of Wanja, John Kisa and their accomplices.

Now, the whole thing was driving him crazy. He wrote a statement at the CID headquarters in Milimani and turned over tons of documents to them. The representations he had made to the Advocates' Complaint Commission and the Law Society of Kenya were yet to generate any response but he was sure that, they too, might require some documents. It was like reopening the whole story of their lives and this distressed him. However, he was still determined to seek justice. After all, he had nothing to lose.

Then, he thought about Sembe. What could have been the extent of her involvement in the scam? Initially, it appeared that Sembe had arranged to sell the property to her friend's husband and then get it back at a later date. But, neither Mish nor Obuya had mentioned anything about her. Obuya even doubted whether Sembe had been paid at all. Now that he thought about it, perhaps Sembe was unaware of the dealings between the crooked lawyer and her college mate. Those two were swindling both her and him with one stroke of the pen. He had a strong urge to call Sembe but avoided the idea. Perhaps, there were better ways of finding out. He picked up the phone and dialled James Okola's number. When James answered the phone, Amu said, "Hello James, how are you?"

"I am doing fine, *Ori*."

"I didn't want to bother you, James, but certain matters have come to my attention and I thought I should let you know."

“And what are these matters, *Ori*?”

“You are aware that I lost the house in Kileleshwa?”

“No, I am not aware.”

“Well your sister took the house and sold it through some illegal dealings. I reported the matter to the CID and, soon, the long arm of the law will catch up with her. The reason I am calling is to inform you that whatever I am about to do does not in any way signify any hatred for you or your family. On the contrary, I have but the greatest respect for your family and I would never do anything to harm them. I also love my children very dearly and I know that their mother is a very important person in their lives right now. However, now, I need to ensure that justice is done.”

“What has she done?”

“She gave the property to John Kisa, Ayugi’s husband, at a very low price probably so that she can get me out of the picture. They ignored the proper procedure and sold the house as though it was a *Mandazi*. Now, they have got to answer for it.”

“This is very serious.”

“Indeed, it is and I will ensure that they are punished to the full extent of the law. I know we had problems but that was no ticket for her to take the house and give to a friend.”

“That was a little hasty on her part.”

“Not only that, it is inconsiderate to our children as well.”

“You know, *Ori*, problems between you and my sister are not beyond resolution. As a matter of fact, last month your parents and mine agreed that the clan should sit down and talk to you both. I don’t know about you, but I can tell you that my sister was very excited about it. Of course, you know her. Her emotions never show easily but, in this instance I feel that she was behind the whole move. Is it possible, *Ori* to slow down a little bit and see how these issues will turn out?”

“I don’t understand. How could she be thinking of a thing like that and sell the house at the same time? I don’t understand, *Ori*, I don’t.”

“You know that my sister and I don’t agree on many things so I wouldn’t know exactly what is going on in her mind. However, I know and even my wife can tell you this, she wants you back in her life but she doesn’t know how to ask.”

"She called me a few minutes ago. If that is the case, why didn't she tell me so?"

"She called you?"

"Yeah!"

"You see. That is how my sister is. I am curious though, what did she want?"

"Well, she wanted me to go see the children. Then, she mentioned another girl."

"You see. *Ori*, I am aware that you may be knowledgeable about my sister's disposition more than I am, but when a woman asks you to go see her children; she is telling you that she needs you. Believe me, it is never them, it is always the children. Then, she was complaining about another woman—that is jealousy. People are never jealous of a person with whom they don't have or desire to have any connection. If she cares about you, even remotely, then she must be jealous. I can bet that it is the other woman that made her call you. I learnt that she was at my place over the weekend, talking about you and all that. *Ori*, my sister still loves you and, poor her, she may never be able to love another man again in her life...that is if the two of you never get together again."

"How about the man called Toni?"

"Oh, the engineer at Kenya Electric? Yes I know him. I think he got tired of trying to woo my sister and so a few weeks ago, he got married to a girl called Mary Oracha. She used to work in the ministry with your wife. He is such a joke. If you can get together with Gladys, she can tell you more stories."

"*Ori*, right now, I am so confused. I would never admit it if it were not for the fact that some wrong has been done to me by a person whom I dearly loved. For now, could you kindly pass her the information and let her know that she might end up in jail."

"I will do so if that is what you want but, please think about the matters we have discussed and should you need anything, anything at all, then let me know."

"Thanks, *Ori*. I know you have been very helpful to me in the past. Please pass my greetings to *Mara* and the children. Bye."

Amu could have laughed at the suggestion that Sembe was making a behind the scene reconciliation bid if he hadn't an inkling of the sort himself. Now that he thought about it, the fact that

Sembe seemed preoccupied with matters of love when her friends were busy pillaging her wealth did not appear strange at all. From the day he saw her in court, he was convinced that she still had feelings for him. It was written all over her face. She wasn't yet ready to let go of the marriage. Now that his suspicion was being confirmed from a very unlikely quarter, he found his mind ringing in all directions. Should he call her and apologize for his rudeness and then crawl back into her house as most men do nowadays? How could he go about seeking forgiveness when everything she said to him evoked such deep feelings of anger and mistrust?

Chapter Eighteen

A YUGI PUT THE tea cup in her lips, intending to savour its aroma and smooth taste. She liked local tea and always insisted on buying it despite her husband's preference for exotic brands. But, this morning, not even tea could quell her anxiety. Her hands were shaking and her heart beat fast. John had not been home for two nights in a row and she had no idea where he was. When he did not come home on Thursday night, she did not give it much thought. After all, that was how he was; sometimes taking off to Uganda or Britain and then calling her the next morning. But, the whole day yesterday he did not call. She hoped that he would come home by nightfall. When he did not show up by midnight, she started to get worried. She slept on and off and was hardly rested. The anxiety and worry had not subsided by morning.

She stood up, went to the basin and rinsed her cup. She walked to the porch, hoping to see John arrive. The sun was warm and bright. As she sat in the large bamboo chair, she caught the feeling of quiet and stillness all around her. She picked up a copy of *Vogue Magazine* and scanned its pages. Finding nothing to divert her exasperated mood and feeling a little tired of reading, she dropped it to her feet and leaned back in the chair. She had a good view of the big homes dotting the stretch of the valley below. Each behemoth had a swimming pool and a tennis court beside it. It was hard to imagine that this was part of Nairobi, a city where millions were going without water and food. By all standards, she was doing well. Of all her friends, she was the only one living in Runda. Furthermore, John had ensured that she was comfortable despite not having a job. Their five bedroom house was the envy of many of her college mates. She had a new car, a generous allowance, an electrifying wardrobe and a house decked out with an ensemble of modern entertainment gadgets.

When she thought of him, a strange feeling of gloom came over her. Suppose something awful happened to him, what would she do? She had no idea how to run his business because she had never bothered to get involved in the affairs of Mbale Enterprises and whatever other subsidiaries there were. Also, she realised that she did not know John very well. Even after fifteen years of marriage, she was yet to meet his mother, brother or sister. He would always talk of his relatives and, sometimes, it seemed as though he was talking to his mother on the phone, but no one ever came to Nairobi to visit. Did these relatives know her and Chad? If anything happened to him, whom would she contact? Perhaps, John had already transferred all his properties to them, leaving Chad and her with nothing.

Could it be that John had migrated to Uganda? How she wished that she had begun looking for a job, as she had resolved after Sembe left Kileleshwa. When she made the suggestion to John, he brushed it aside as though it were not important. But that was John, always reducing matters of her concern to a mere idiosyncrasy of a frustrated and bored housewife. Obviously, he couldn't anticipate ill luck or even death, so what did it matter? God gracious, now he wasn't home and she needed to assure herself that everything was in order. Why were all these crazy thoughts swarming her mind? John could be on his way home, she thought, heaving a muted sigh.

Chad emerged from the house and ran straight to the gate to join a coterie of obese children from the neighbouring homes. It seemed as though the only tie between her and John was the boy. But, Chad wasn't the only good thing that had come out of her marriage. She would have stayed with him nonetheless but the boy had more than compensated for the long nights she spent alone when John was away on business. Now, he was a big boy in Standard Four and he had his friends. It was time for her to find a useful way of occupying her time so that she need not worry herself sick whenever John was away. Maybe, she needed another child. This was a matter that she could discuss with him when he returns. As she rose to go back to the house, she heard the sound of a car coming to her gate. How appropriate it was, she thought, for him to arrive just when she had an agenda to discuss. When the gate was opened, the car that drove in wasn't John's red BMW but a Peugeot 605 belonging to Ken Waswa, his personal assistant.

Standing nervously on the porch, Ayugi looked at Ken approaching the house. He was taller and darker than John, a little skinny with long legs. Ken was a Samia from Busia and he had Ugandan ancestry. She descended the steps to meet him. With weariness in her voice, she said, "Hello, Ken."

"Hello, Mrs Kisa, Well, it sure is a beautiful day. Is he still asleep?"

"No. John has not come home since Thursday. When I saw you, I thought you had some news for us."

"No, I don't. In fact, we were waiting for him in the office on Friday but he did not come so I thought I should come and check on him here."

"I have not seen him."

Ken took a moment, staring at her listlessly. "Maybe, he went to Kampala abruptly," he said. "I will go back to the office and try to call Uganda to see what I come up with. In the meantime if he comes could you ask him to call me?"

"I certainly will but I have a bad feeling, Ken. Do you really think he could have gone to Uganda without letting us know?"

"Don't worry. I am sure everything will be fine. John is mixed up in some business deal. He will get in touch with us as soon as he is through."

"You think so?"

"I believe so. Now, take care of yourself Mrs Kisa. I will see you later. Let me run back to the office."

When Ken was gone, Ayugi walked back to the house, even more confused. Her expectations that Ken would shed some light on her husband's whereabouts and that talking to him might assuage her fears were vitiated by his seemingly brash attitude and his lack of knowledge about what his boss was up to. It made Ayugi suspect that something dreadful could have happened to her husband. Ken and John were like brothers. Sometimes, she even believed that Ken knew more about John than she did. John would never take a trip like that without informing Ken. If something bad happened to John, what would she do? She did not have as much nerve as Sembe. She could never survive on her own. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she could barely hold herself together. By the time she reached the bedroom, she was crying so loudly that the housemaids thought she was sick.

Amu woke up with a very bad headache. He had swallowed a few aspirins, hoping that the pain would subside, for he had planned to clean the kitchen and, later, wash a few clothes. He had even assembled the necessary paraphernalia and moved all the dirty dishes and pots to one end of the sink. Still, his head pounded like a steel mill. Before, he used to stock a few beers in the house just in case he needed a little something to beat the morning hangover. That habit had died when Sally came to live with him. For her it was anathema to drink in the house, especially in the morning and constant nagging wore him down. So, he had indulged her and bought aspirins instead. But, the tiny tablets did not seem to work. Today, he had swallowed four and his condition was still the same. Perhaps, if he went back to bed, he would feel better, he thought. After all, it was Saturday—he could stay in bed all day if he wanted to. Thus, he packed everything away and slowly walked to his bedroom. He flung himself on the bed and swaddled himself between the sheets.

Unable to find sleep, he wondered why nothing seemed to work in his favour. His immediate frustration was Sally. At first, he was worried about the legality of their cohabitation. Technically, he was still married to Sembe because the divorce wasn't yet finalised. According to Kambero, he wasn't offending any law except if he married her. This, of course, would be "bigamy", an offence punishable by imprisonment and a fine. If such a law really existed, Amu wondered why some of his friends had never been prosecuted. Jack Wasonga, the only quantity surveyor from his clan, had married his first wife in a glamorous wedding ceremony at a Catholic church in Kisumu. Five years later, Jack married Eunice, Sembe's college mate, allegedly under *Luo* customary law. This law was surely the most ineffective Amu had ever known. Therefore, he chose to ignore the possible illegality of his association with Sally. In any event, what was he expected to do if his wife had run out of the matrimonial home and wasn't keen to provide conjugal support?

However, their cohabitation began to cause him problems at the office. When Mr Musumba was hired as the new General Manager, Amu was relegated to his old office in the production unit. Sally, of course, remained in the General Manager's office. Since their move upstairs was, technically, a promotion for her, he thought it wise to let her remain there although a lot was to depend on whether the

new boss found her useful. This wasn't a problem. Sally was, perhaps, the most efficient secretary in the entire establishment. The problem was that Sally began to like the new boss too much. When she came home, it was all about him. Oh, did you know Mr Musumba bought a new car; Oh, Mr Musumba bought all the girls lunch today; Oh, Mr Musumba wants to buy a house in Rose Gardens. Oh, Mr Musumba's clothes fit him so well; Oh, Mr Musumba's cologne smells so good; Oh, Mr Musumba is going to England next weekend. Mr Musumba this and Mr Musumba that, all the time, had jaded his nerves. "Since you like him so much, why don't you go and live with him?" he had once asked her. Sally dismissed him as being jealous. Later, he began to hear rumours in the office that Sally and Mr Musumba were having an affair. When he asked Sally about it, she still dismissed it as mere jealousy. But, her behaviour changed a great deal. She would come home late after work and go straight to bed. During weekends, she would be gone until Monday morning. It was as though he was living all by himself. When he confronted her, she feigned annoyance and boasted that she was capable of living on her own. He thought that she would move out sooner but the status quo never changed. Instead, he started receiving unpleasant memos from the General Manager and the Managing Director about his poor performance at work.

When his parents came to know of his association with Sally, his father sent a strongly worded letter candidly denouncing his association with a married woman and summoning him to the village. His father informed him that he was talking to Sembe's parents so that the problem between them can be resolved. Such a venture was only being complicated by his alleged involvement with another woman. He needed to know when Amu could come home so that they could set a date for a meeting. His father reminded him that, in his family, no man had ever divorced his wife. It was cowardly and ungodly. The letter also touched on his drunkenness. He wondered how his father was so informed about matters concerning his personal life. Of course, the entire content of his father's letter was true. His visits to Mama Nitilie in Ndondosha Lane Seven for *Chang'aa* were irritating to many people, including Sally. But, the habit had become his way of life. He found *Chang'aa* more soothing than beer. Moreover, at Mama Nitilie, he could smile at someone

and be certain to get a smile in return. It was a place where he felt wanted and appreciated, not merely a rejected husband, and all these at a negligible cost. He did not see how he could lead his life in any other way.

The fact that his parents thought that his marriage could still be salvaged did not surprise him. The legal wrangling in the Nairobi courts meant very little to the village folks. As far as they were concerned, the tenure of a marriage could only be affected by what the elders decided and not what a distant judge ordered. No matter how aloof he sought to remain, he knew that he would finally have to pay the piper. His day before the elders would come, whether in life or in death. Now, it seemed as though the day would come sooner rather than later. According to Sembe's brother, things seemed to be moving pretty fast. And now that Sembe, herself, was involved, perhaps it would not be more than a month before he heard from his parents again. He wondered what the elders would ask or what they would do that would make him and his wife resolve their differences. They seemed so inclined to live separate lives and yet so vulnerable to the intimate memories of the past. No matter the case, he thought, he wasn't going to fight the winds of change. He needed a little love himself so any venture that would build bridges that he wasn't able to build himself was a welcome relief. Moreover, it could be the push he needed to turn his life around. At the thought of him and his wife coming home to a happy reunion, his bones weakened. He slid back between the sheets and closed his eyes. The seeping warmth of the bed took its toll. Had he stayed awake for one more minute, he would have heard the voices of a man and a woman who were asking for directions to his apartment.

Amu was awakened by someone knocking on the door. Sleepily, he dragged his body out of bed, pulled on his gown and staggered to the door. Standing in the hallway was his mother, Susana, and Kizito. He was stunned, surprised and bewildered; he just stood there. The overwhelming presence of his mother was more than he could deal with. It was as though she had cast a spell on him. When he tried to say something, words wouldn't come out of his mouth.

His mother broke the silence. "Hello, Amu, it is me," she said.

Yawning, not fully awake, Amu looked at them, his mind still unable to register what his eyes were seeing. When he did, he gave

a squeal of delight and said, "Hello, mother. It is you. Oh, and Kizito...and you too, *Semeji*. Welcome everybody."

"Let us pray," Valerina said as they entered the living room.

"Heavenly father, Lord who sits on the mighty throne, we come to You in the name of Jesus. First, we thank You for the gift of life and for the beautiful day that You have so graciously allowed us to witness. Also Lord, we want to thank You for friendship, food and all that you have given us. Thank You, father. Lord, right now we come to You with special needs. We know that you have made a promise to us that whatever we ask, You will grant us, Lord. This morning, I lift your servant, Amu, who is afflicted by the desires of the body and the evil of alcoholism. Help him, Lord. Show him the right way. Your power is greater than any other power and no man can ever compete with You, Lord. If it is because of the hands of man, that your son, Amu, must suffer like this, Lord, I ask You to stop the evil doers. Stop them, Lord. There is no name greater than Jesus. So, today we lift up His name and thank You for all You have done for us. Now, as we greet each other, Lord, bless each one of us. We pray all these in the mighty name of Jesus, our saviour, Amen."

"Amen."

"Welcome everybody," Amu said, his initial expression of surprise evolving into a fully-fledged smile.

"Many, many days, my son...How have you been?" Valerina said, extending her arms to greet him. There was a smile all over her face.

Amu and his mother shook hands for a whole minute. Then, Amu swept away the untidy bunch of clothes from the chair and pushed it close to his mother. She sat on it immediately. Amu grabbed the other chair, tilted it slightly so that the papers, books and magazines that were on it fell noisily on the floor. "Sit down, *Semeji*. Make yourselves comfortable", he said, dashing off into his bedroom.

"How are you doing, my son?" Valerina asked again.

He barely heard her but still responded, almost shouting, "I am doing fine, Mother." Absently closing the bedroom door and then leaning against it for a second, he thought about his predicament. He least expected his mother to be in Nairobi at this time, let alone find her way to his flat in Hurlingham. His initial feeling was that of bewilderment but, now, he was annoyed that he wasn't informed

of this earlier. Usually, his parents would warn him if they planned to visit. His father, especially, would never allow an intrusion of this kind. Quickly, he ran through his mind scenarios that might have necessitated such an abrupt visit. Perhaps, something serious like illness or death had happened at home. Perhaps, it was because he never responded to his father's letter. This seemed the most likely reason. So, it was about Sembe. He felt a warm surge of energy seeping through his body, just as it did these days whenever he thought of Sembe. As he undressed, his thought trailed off to the very first time his mother attempted to reconcile him and his wife. The whole endeavour might have succeeded if he had gone to Mamboleo that weekend as he had promised.

He put on a pair of jeans and went into the living room. Standing next to his mother, he asked, "How is father? How is Kodegi?"

"We are all fine. Your father and all the servants of the Lord have sent you greetings," she answered.

"That is good. I am also doing fine. Did you have problems trying to find this house? Did you get lost?" Amu asked, in rapid succession.

"Oh, yes. But, these two are city wizards. They can find any corner," Valerina said, pointing at Kizito and Susana. "My fear was that we might not find you."

"On Saturdays, I am always in. I was still in bed."

"We see that," she said with resignation. "The Lord is great. We found you."

"Did you arrive this morning?"

"No, I came yesterday evening. Kizito was to ask you for directions yesterday but you were not at work so, we decided to try our luck."

"I was feeling a little unwell."

"Anyway, things have turned out well, praise the Lord."

There were only three seats in the room so Amu remained standing. Kizito might have thought it embarrassing for his boss to be standing like that. He offered him a seat, but Amu declined. Instead, he went back to the bedroom and brought out another chair.

In the meantime, Valerina gazed wildly at the surrounding, evidently dissatisfied with her son's abode. She motioned Susana to pass the big manila sack that they had brought with them. In it,

were dried fish, millet and some groundnuts. She opened the bag and asked Amu to bring a container. Whatever she had in the bag was to be passed to her son in the open. He fumbled with the dishes in the kitchen and, finally, came with a plastic bowl. Valerina removed the fish one by one, fussed a little, and laid them in the bowl. Then, she passed the bowl to him. Satisfied that only groundnuts remained, she tied the sack and handed it to him. The little ceremony had come to an end, but not before she gave instructions on how to store and, ultimately, prepare the fish.

“So, did you receive your father’s letter?” she inquired.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you respond to it?”

“I have been busy at the office, Mother.”

Amu glanced at her and their eyes met in brief defiance. She studied him doubtfully for a moment and then said, “You were not busy in the office. From what I hear, you have found *Chang’aa*, my son, and *Chang’aa* people can never find time to do anything, even just a little time to clean their own houses. They are married to evil.” Her voice sounded implacable.

“Mother!”

Tough and unyielding, she continued, “Yes. Am I not right?”

“You woke me up, Mother. I haven’t had time to do the cleaning.”

The war between mother and son had started in earnest. Kizito, feeling distinctively uncomfortable about the not so cordial exchange between these two, searched for something positive to say, but Susana beat him to it. She, too, might have been discomfited by the turn of events. Rising up to go into the kitchen, she said, “*Semeji*, can I prepare for you something? You look like you have not taken breakfast.”

“Yes, *Min Kaunda*. I have just woken up but the kitchen...the kitchen is such a mess.”

“Don’t worry. I will manage,” she said shedding her jacket on Kizito’s lap.

Amu was a little ashamed about the state of his kitchen but he had more pressing things to worry about. It looked as though his mother had brought the war to his doorstep and he had nowhere to seek refuge.

“Why are you saying the kitchen is a mess? I thought you were staying with a woman?”

Amu’s jaw tightened. He never thought that the subject would arise so early in the conversation. He took a deep breath, and then, a moment of contemplation. He knew that whatever he would say about Sally was bound to attract further questions and even innuendos, which he could surely do without. But, there was no way of curtailing her mother’s train of thought.

“Not exactly, Mother,” he said. “Sally only came here when she was looking for a house.”

“For how long has she stayed? Is it not more than a month?”

“But, she hasn’t found a place yet!”

“She came here for a reason, Amu. Her intention is to wreck your marriage. She is evil. You have a wife and three children, why didn’t she find somebody else?”

Amu thought about his mother’s concern for a while. It was curious that he and Sembe had separated for well over two years yet his mother still regarded him as a married man, and judged him on that score.

“Sally is not like that, Mother. She is not looking for marriage or anything like that.”

“But, why is she here? Amu, why is the woman here if she is not looking for marriage? Is she a prostitute?”

“Mother!”

“This is the reason I am here—to chase her away. She is ruining you, Amu. She should go back to her husband.”

Amu had been distraught when Sally stayed out late or never came home as she did last night. But, now, he wished that she could stay way until his mother went back to Andora. He knew his mother wasn’t the kind of person who would say something if she did not mean it. Moreover, he had never seen her like this. Always, she was supportive and even when she did not quite agree with his point of view, she would find a way of accommodating him and then later, much later, subtly invite him to consider the alternative. This wasn’t to say that she did not exert any parental control. It was only that he preferred her gentle approach to his father’s bellicose methods. Moreover, she accomplished a lot more through her diplomacy than his father did through his brusqueness. Today, his mother was

different. She was like his father, direct, bold and confrontational. What had become of the woman, he couldn't tell. Perhaps, it was because he had not sent her money for the last five or six months.

"By the way, where is she now?" she asked, still determined to discuss the subject.

"She went on a safari," Amu replied curtly.

"I thought you were going to tell me that she has moved out then, I was going to ask you why her picture is still on the wall. Is that not her picture over there?" Valerina asked, pointing to Sally's portrait that was hanging outside the bathroom.

When Sally first hung that picture, they had a quarrel. He wanted her to remove it because visitors to the house might think they were involved in something permanent. She was adamant so like most men, he did not want to fight over an insignificant thing. His fears were being vindicated today. Yet he could hardly convince his mother that the picture meant nothing to him. He felt completely subdued.

"Yes, Mother, that is she," Amu said, trying to keep his voice calm.

When he said this, Valerina stood up and went to examine it more closely. Then, she yanked it from the wall and lay it on the table. "She has to move from this house today and take her things with her. If she doesn't, she will know that I am the daughter of Winga. Today, I am ready to die!"

Amu did not say a word. The humiliation that he was about to suffer was unimaginable. He could picture people in the office talking about it for the next year—how his mother tossed his girlfriend out of his house. He rose from the chair and turned to say something to his mother but changed his mind. He needed something to do to ameliorate the pressure. He loathed discussing Sally with her or anybody else for that matter because he wasn't sure where their relationship was going. But, his mother wasn't the type of woman you would simply brush aside a topic. Apparently, the reason she was in Nairobi was to deal with the Sally issue more than it was to reconcile him with Sembe. In her view, the prospect of reconciliation depended on the Sally factor, just as it had depended on Beth a year ago. Inasmuch as he wanted to indulge her feelings, given that she had good intentions, the manner in which she was pursuing her

goal seemed completely unfair to him. At least, his mother ought to realise that he was responsible enough to handle Sally. He did not need any help.

The tension in the house was pervasive. Even Susana who was in the kitchen couldn't help but twitch her eyes when Amu came to her. She had finished cleaning and had a pot on the stove. It seemed as though she wanted to make tea or porridge but couldn't find milk or sugar because neither was available. He did not wait to be asked.

"*Semeji*, I don't think I have any sugar. Can you get some from the shopping centre?" he asked. "It is not far."

"Yes."

"Then, let me get you some money. While you are there, you can get some meat and vegetables," Amu said as he disappeared into his bedroom. When he came back, Kizito was standing beside his wife. Amu walked them to the door and shut it behind them.

He turned back and faced his mother. Valerina, left alone with her son, tilted her head to one side and smiled. Her manner was more relaxed and less confrontational. Amu sat next to her, hoping that the encounter would be less about him and Sally, but more about Sembe. However, he was reluctant to start any such conversation, lest his mother think he was merely diverting attention from more pressing issues. However, his anxiety did not escape her.

"Have you seen *Nyar Komogi* lately?" she asked as though to indulge his line of thought.

"No. I only talked to her on the phone."

"How about my grandchildren?"

"They are fine."

"Your father wants you to go and settle your marriage problems with her parents. Even when a man disagrees with his wife, he must seek her parents and discuss the issue with them. This is why your father wrote to you."

"Yes, he said that in his letter. But, I wanted to get ready first and then write to him."

"This matter should be done immediately and it doesn't require a lot of money, you know."

Amu was beginning to relax when the door opened suddenly and Sally walked in. She was dressed in tight blue jeans and a white T-shirt. She did not talk to anybody. She shot passed them

like an arrow and disappeared into the bedroom. After a few seconds, Amu heard noises in bedroom. He rose up and went in there. Sally was throwing her clothes on the bed and Amu's on the floor.

"How are you, Sally?" he said, hoping to start a conversation with her.

She did not reply. Unbeknown to him, Sally had met Kizito and Susana at the shopping centre and had been fully briefed on the situation that was developing at home. Amu, on his part, thought it strange that the woman did not want to talk to him. At least, she owed him an explanation as to where she was the whole night. She couldn't walk in and out of his house as she pleased. Also, he was unhappy that Sally showed no respect to his mother. What kind of person would find visitors in her house and fail to greet them? Perhaps, Sally had finally found a place to live, he thought. Notwithstanding, there were better ways of expressing one's gratitude to a person who had lodged you for more than a month.

"Are you moving out?" he asked, his voice awash with relief.

"Moving out I am. Is that not why your mother is here? To kick me out?" she retorted, her mouth twisted like a viper about to spit venom.

"Who...who told you?" he stammered.

"Kizito and Susana are here to witness. You bring your whole clan to watch your girlfriend being thrown out by your mother. I have never met such a foolish man! No wonder Sembe couldn't stay with you!"

"Don't bring Sembe into this. Moreover, who told you that I want you out? If that is what I wanted, I could have done so when you started sleeping with..."

"It is none of your business whom I sleep with. I am not your wife."

"You are living in my house so you must respect my visitors."

"Not when they don't like me."

"What do you mean they don't like you?"

"Your mother. She hates me."

"Why do you say that?"

"She hates me without even knowing me. She has been around since Thursday, planning how to evict me. All of you have been planning this thing. Do you think I am stupid or what?"

Taking deep breaths to calm himself, Amu smiled at her and said, "You know how I feel about you, Sally?"

"Don't smother me, Amu. You and your mother want me out of this place so out I go."

"Look, Sally, I can make arrangements for you to stay at a hotel until she goes and then we can go back to the way we were."

"No way!" she snorted.

She pulled out her suitcase from beneath the bed then stuffed her clothes in it. When full, she swung it over her back and took it downstairs to her car. She came back with a large garbage bag. She put the rest of her things into it and hurled the load onto her shoulders. She grabbed her purse and beat a hasty retreat past the sitting room and down the stairs. Amu followed her to the pavement and watched as she entered the car. She did not bother to say goodbye and neither did he. She made a careful turn and headed towards the gate.

He stood out there, a string of sweat trickling down his face and his heart beating fast below his ribs. When the humiliation began to drown his thoughts, he closed his eyes. Although he had reservations about Sally's commitment to their affair, he had never thought their relationship would end in such a manner. When he opened his eyes again, he saw Kizito and Susana coming through the gate. He waited for them and, together, they walked to the stairs leading to his flat.

Saturday morning did not bring much happiness to Wanja Peters either. First of all, she had to wake up at five o'clock to pick up her father from Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. The old man had been on a tourist promotional trip to Europe. His British Airways flight from London was scheduled to arrive at eight o'clock but was delayed until nine thirty. And, even when it landed, her father wasn't on it. She waited until the last passenger had come through the arrivals terminal before she left. That was about ten o'clock. The long drive back to Limuru did not do her nerves any good. The traffic on Uhuru Highway was thick and slow; the police stops on Waiyaki Way irritating. By the time she got home, her mood was as foul as it could get. But then, she had been in bad mood all week or even the whole month, especially after she realised that John Kisa

had probably cheated her out of millions of shillings. It would not be so bad if he did not cheat her out of love, too. John Kisa was one hell of a bastard, she thought, sleek and calculating and very handsome. For a while, she had thought that she was in love with him. How could she be so blind, sleeping with a man who did not hide the fact that he was happily married? All she had done was to indulge John in his forays into infidelity, and he being the sly trickster he was, had taken advantage of her, torn her heart into shreds, wrecked her law practice and disappeared into thin air.

She arrived home at ten thirty, parked the Mercedes on the concrete ramp behind the main hotel kitchen so that the cooks could wash it. She walked about two hundred metres to the old Victorian house that had been the family abode since her grandfather bought the land. The house had more than sixteen bedrooms, all self-contained. She was occupying one wing of the house, complete with a kitchen, bathroom, living room and a spacious bedroom. Her side could be accessed through the back door and without going through the main house. When she got to the house, she realised she had left without making breakfast or the bed. But she felt neither hungry nor particularly eager to do any tidying up. She knew that Wamboi, the housemaid, would have been quite happy to help her with it but that would be contrary to her principle on privacy. She pushed the ruffled sheets and blanket to one side of the huge bed and sat down. Then, she removed her shoes and turned on the television set. Nothing interesting was on so she turned it off. A draft blew through one of her bedroom windows, showering its chill directly on her face. She rose up, closed the window and came back to the bed, only this time, she lay down and pulled the sheets over her.

The fact that she had allowed John to take advantage of her, kneaded at the very core of her being. With a renewed sense of guilt, she thought about the first time John made love to her. It was right after she settled the terms of sale of the Sembe Ndeda property. He had called her immediately she came from court and, when she gave him the news, he proposed they celebrate. He invited her to the Grand Duke Hotel for dinner later that evening. When she entered the lobby that night, John was there already. He rose and slowly extended his right arm from behind his back. The sweet scent

of the white roses and calla lilies had sent her directly into his arms. "Thank you John," she had said. John had rented an executive suite and also arranged for dinner to be served in the room. One thing led to another and, before she knew it, they were in each other's arms, naked and in bed. When they left the next morning, he gave her a cheque for three million shillings to settle the mortgage, pay whatever was due to Amu Ndeda, the stamp duty and transfer charges. John wanted the property transferred to his company, Mbale Enterprises. Later that week, he paid her another one million shillings for her fees.

During the period that the property was being transferred, John was very close to her. They saw each other almost daily and spent weekends in Mombasa, Nakuru and, sometimes in Kampala. Her visit to Kampala was particularly memorable. It had evoked some very strong emotions about her mother because it was the closest she ever got to sharing in her mother's world. That her mother had originally come from Uganda was a fact she came to know much later in life, probably after she came from Canada. All along, the memories about her were ensconced in childhood fantasies, so remote and nebulous. Yet here she was, amongst her mother's people, but without a clue as to where she could find any of her relatives. That night at the Sheraton, she cried all night at the thought that she might never see her mother again. But, John had been very kind and supportive. He seemed to understand completely the pain that she was going through. When the emotions overcame her, John even offered to help her to locate her mother. That was probably the only lucid moment that they ever shared. Back in Nairobi, and with the transfer of the property having been completed, John became a very scarce commodity. He never called and never came to see her. When she traced him to his International Trade House office, she could never find him. When she became weary of looking for him, she decided to conduct an official "search" on the property. She discovered that Mbale Enterprises had sold the property to another company unknown to her.

She was distraught. Sembe was yet to be paid her portion of the sale price, the auctioneer who had helped with the preparation of the documents still demanded some money, and she was missing him terribly. As if all these were not trouble enough, a man called

Wahome, her father's cousin, had, somehow, got wind that she had property to sell. He implored her to sell the property to him. The mistake she made was to ask him to wait for the auction, but the auction never happened. When Wahome learnt that the property was sold, he came home and openly rebuked her in her father's presence. This did not go down well with the old man and he sought to know the details of the matter. She did not tell him the full story, only that the property was being sold to settle a matrimonial dispute. Two months later, she got a call from the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) of the Kenya Police asking her to furnish them with the details of the sale. They told her that a complaint had been filed, alleging some malfeasance. She panicked. At first, she thought that it was Sembe who had filed the complaint. She did not know whom to turn to, being too ashamed to reveal to her father how she had landed in such a mess. From the little money here and there and with the help of Scholastica she was able to raise at least four hundred thousand shillings. She readjusted the papers and prepared fresh accounts that would reflect a similar balance. She sent the money to Sembe and then went to see the CID officers. There, she learned that it was Amu who had lodged a complaint. Even after she showed them the evidence that Amu had been paid three months earlier, the police were still adamant that they wanted to see all the documents relating to the transaction. They also indicated that they intended to talk to the courts, the auctioneer and all other persons connected to the matter. They asked her to sign an agreement that she would not leave Nairobi without consulting them. That day, she also received two letters: one from a lawyer, a Mr Stephen Wellington Obuya, demanding the account for the sale of the Kileleshwa house; the other from the Advocates Complaint Commission, asking her to show cause why disciplinary proceedings should not be filed against her in respect of the same matter. Both letters gave her seven days to respond.

That night, she couldn't sleep. At midnight, she drove to Aunt Georgina Wamugunda's house in Rose Gardens. She narrated the whole naked truth to her. In the end, Aunt Georgina offered to help. She promised to take care of Mr Obuya that week and to contact a friend of hers who had a high position in the police force. As for the Advocates' Complaint Commission, Georgina asked her

not to worry because it was a “toothless bulldog, merely interested in harassing lawyers”. That week, things moved very fast. Apparently, Mr Obuya lost interest in Amu when Georgina, who happened to be the Managing Director of EAP, promised to give his law firm some corporate briefs. Obuya later called Wanja to apologise for the “little misunderstanding” and promised to make it up to her. As for the police, thirty thousand shillings did the trick. Amu’s complaint was reduced to a family quarrel in which lawyers had no part. What couldn’t be taken care of immediately was John. When Wanja went to see Auntie Georgina two weeks ago, she was going on a trip to Zimbabwe so they couldn’t talk much. However, Georgina promised to deal with the John issue when she returned. As for Amu and the annoyance he had caused, a little “something” was in store for him too.

Almost one hour had gone past before Wanja realised that she was still in bed. She might have spent the whole afternoon wrapped between her sheets if her stomach did not start growling. She hurriedly got up and lumbered to the bathroom. She washed her face, brushed her teeth again, shimmied into a pair of blue jeans and a baggy McGill sweatshirt and went to the kitchen. Although she was feeling a lot better than she did earlier, she still had to find something to do that would keep her mind off John. The time was almost noon and the lazy Saturday sun was quickly giving way to clouds. She poured herself a bowl of cereal and sat next to the window munching and looking at the lush grass of the golf course that stretched down to the Valley of the Limuru River. She could almost catch the scent of the green field, the scarlet rose bushes and the white impatiens that bordered it. It was a beautiful sight—inseparably connected to her life. When two white golfers emerged from the valley, their black caddies tugging along like toddlers after their mothers, she saw the folly of staying indoors. She looked at the bowl of cereal, scooped up a spoonful and went back to the stove to make a cup of hot tea. The phone rang so she turned off the stove and rushed to answer it.

“Hello,” her father’s faint voice answered from the other end.

“Father, is that you?” Wanja asked almost hysterically.

“It is me. I am sorry but I am not coming home until Wednesday. Something has come up.”

"I was at the airport this morning to pick you up."

"I am sorry, kitten. I should have called. Is everything all right?"

"Yes."

"I am coming on Wednesday morning with a British Airways flight. Can you arrange to fetch me?"

"I sure will. Have a safe trip father and remember the shoes and the watch."

"I will remember, kitten. Bye for now."

Wanja and her father were very close and, sometimes, she was conscious of being overprotective of him. She wondered what would become of their relationship if he ever married again. After her parents separated, and they came back to Kenya, her father remarried but the air hostess never stayed. She divorced him after two years for an American tourist then migrated to New York. Her father never remarried as most men would have done. Even with her grandfather's urging and plodding, her father never bulged. With two failed marriages, he decided that the only women he needed in his life were his two daughters. Wanja was aware that before and after her grandfather passed away, her father had occasional friends coming to visit and staying overnight. But, this was done with utmost secrecy. Now that he was abroad, it was likely that he might be having a romantic liaison, which was fine as long as he did not bring her home to crowd their family space.

When Sembe received the money from the sale of the Kileleshwa house, she split it into three and deposited everything in her daughters' bank accounts. Their father had bought the house for them so it was only logical that the money be kept for them. What puzzled her was the price for which the house had been sold. It was far too low. That a house worth over twelve million was sold for a paltry six million, and that the sale was concluded so fast, spoke plainly of the possibility that something was wrong. Perhaps, the lawyer had bought the house for herself. She regretted deeply having agreed to go along with the plan to sell the house. Her curiosity made her call Wanja. She wanted to know how the sale was conducted and who the purchaser was. The lawyer denied knowledge

but promised to inquire from the estate agent who did the transaction. She did call Wanja two weeks later but still, she had no answer for her. However, Wanja promised to get back to her the following week. She never did. Knowing that Ayugi and Wanja were best friends, she avoided talking to Ayugi about this issue, at least for the time being.

Chapter Nineteen

A FORTNIGHT AFTER Valerina went back to Kodegi, Amu received a letter from Steven Wellington Obuya, informing him that the lawyer was no longer interested in representing him. He asked Amu to collect his documents as soon as possible. The sudden change of attitude by Obuya greatly dismayed him and he knew something sinister was going on, either between his lawyer and Wanja, or with that Ugandan, John. After Amu read the letter, he went to the lawyer's office several times, seeking to talk to him but, each time, he was busy. Although Obuya instructed his staff to give Amu the documents whenever he showed up, he insisted that he must talk to the lawyer first. Since this was never possible, he decided to leave his documents there for a while.

One August morning, he woke up with the determination to revive his property case. It was more like finding something to occupy his mind other than the implacable office memos and irate co-workers. At nine o'clock, he was in Obuya's office in Kenda House, demanding to be given all his documents. After collecting them, he went over to CID headquarters in Milimani to see the inspector who was handling his case. There, too, everything was lukewarm. While the inspector did not admit to doing nothing, he indicated that the case seemed like a matrimonial dispute that could appropriately be dealt with through a civil process. He advised Amu to hire a lawyer because the police investigations were "likely to take long". Amu's attempt to nudge the policeman into an understanding of Wanja's culpability based on the general outcry against legal professionals, was met with arcane rebuttal. It was as though Amu was questioning the ethics and proficiency of the force, something that Kenyan policemen never took very kindly to. Moreover, it seemed as hopeless as flogging an old horse, teaching a professional how to do his job.

He left CID Headquarters at noon and walked down Valley Road, his mind completely preoccupied. He was convinced that neither the police nor the lawyers would deliver any justice. These people had been very enthusiastic about the case when he first approached them but, now, they were distant and uncooperative. His lawyer did not even want to talk to him and the police thought he was wasting their time. He was sure that Wanja and John had interfered with them and, unless he had a lot of money, he would not get anywhere. Amu wondered about the wickedness of the rich. They never seem to have enough and could do just about anything and get away with it. The poor had no recourse at all, not even with the law. He crossed Uhuru Highway near the parliament buildings and took City Hall Way into town. At Hilton, he branched left to Swansea and walked past the New Tapestry Restaurant, where tourists were sipping lunch time cappuccinos in the glow of the Nairobi sun. He turned right on Nyatta Avenue, intending to proceed eastward, past Fimbo Avenue, Tom Street and, finally, settling at his favourite haunt—the Jasmine Restaurant and Hotel on Ghana Road. As he was about to cross Fimbo Avenue, a car hooted and stopped barely two feet away from him. A white Peugeot 405 it was, silver rimmed with foreign registration plates. When he looked inside, he saw Cosmas at the wheel and the familiar faces of Osolo and McOloo. Cosmas parked in the middle of the road and invited him to climb in. Amu, though unsure of the direction to which the trio was heading, slipped into the car. He greeted all of them with a cheerful grin.

“Hey, long time no see, *Bwana*. Where have you been hiding, Bro?” McOloo with his usual flamboyance said while extending his arm to Amu for a handshake.

“Long time, *Auka Chour Mon*,” Amu responded, choosing to address McOloo by his nickname. “I am happy to see you. How is everybody else doing?”

“We are fine,” they answered in unison.

“So, what’s the occasion, Cos?”

“We are off to Chunga Moyo for lunch and you are welcome to join us,” Cosmas said without looking back at him.

“Yes, of course,” Amu said.

Amu looked around the car as he spoke, registering them carefully in his mind. Osolo sat with him at the back, his lean frame, stooping shoulders and angular face depicting less gaiety than usual. He was a man who never missed something to say, especially when in the company of friends. But, today, he was sullen and contemplative, a condition quite uncharacteristic of him. Perhaps, he had consumed a lot of alcohol the previous night and was suffering from a late hangover, Amu thought. He threw a glance at McOloo, his balding was receding to the back, leaving dowdy streaks of grey sticking out on the sides like stunted grass and making him appear much older than he actually was.

“Hey, Amu, I am sorry to hear that you have been having problems with your house and the lawyers, man. How far has it gone now?” McOloo asked with an unusual air of concern showing on his face.

“Not very well. Not very well at all,” Amu said with a faint sense of desperation. “I can tell you one thing, *Auka*, divorce in this country is very expensive for the man. The woman gets all she wants: the money for her maintenance, the children, property...everything.”

“This maintenance thing is what defeats me,” Osolo interjected. “Why does a man have to pay maintenance to a woman who is working? If she has a job and is earning a salary, why do you still have to pay her? It is punishment for the husband.”

“That is medieval law. It’s a pity we still have it in our books. This is a modern society, we need to revise our laws,” said Cosmas who had hitherto preferred to concentrate on driving rather than engage in the divorce blab.

“So, anyway, that is why, currently, I cannot even dream of buying a car,” Amu concluded with resignation.

“Don’t worry, Amu,” Osolo said gently as he patted Amu’s shoulders. “Things are never quite as bad as they seem, you know.”

“I have heard that before but it isn’t always true,” said Amu. “Sometimes, they get worse than they seem.”

There was a short spell of silence until McOloo spoke. “Are you saying that if you are planning to divorce, don’t buy a thing?” he said, seemingly intent on cranking up the divorce talk once again.

“Exactly,” Amu said thoughtfully. “What’s the use anyway if she will take everything?”

"If a woman gets everything, then we should probably never register our marriages. Men should insist on marrying under customary law," said McOloo.

"But, in this day and age, which stupid woman would allow you to live with her without any form of official registration?" Cosmas wondered.

"Many," said Osolo. "It is only the educated type who need the legal document. They need it because it is not the marriage that they seek but the benefit that they can get out of it."

"That is why I swore never to marry a woman who has a university degree. They are trouble, I tell you," McOloo quipped.

"What do you mean, *Anka?*" Amu asked. "A woman is a woman, just like a man is a man. When it comes to family or a love relationship, they will always do whatever they want to do, their level of education notwithstanding."

"No, Sir. Education and money give them leverage and power, you know? With these they can cause so much harm," said McOloo. "Let me tell you Amu, of all the women in my Sociology class, only a handful are still married. Ninety percent have divorced. Compare that with the men. Almost all of us are still married. I am not against marrying an educated woman. All I am saying is that the probability of divorce is higher. It is the same with professions. Lawyers have a higher divorce rate than, say teachers. Similarly, women who graduate from teachers colleges do better in marriage than those from universities."

"I agree that the numbers are a such but look at the reasons more closely. Most men are still living in medieval times," Cosmas reasoned. "They cannot stand a woman telling them what to do. This is stupid in my view. A marriage is supposed to be partnership of equals and not the unbalanced contract of master and servant. Men must change."

Osolo wasn't convinced. "It is not the men who need to change, it is the women. That is what I think," he said.

When they reached Chunga Moyo, the parking lot fronting the shopping centre and the open-air vegetable and fruit market was already full. Cosmas squeezed the car in a narrow grassy patch beside a small grocery kiosk that stood by itself about fifty metres away from the shopping centre. Young men were idling around the kiosk

and on the pot-holed sidewalk while children from the surrounding houses were playing soccer on a dusty field behind a charcoal retail yard. Cosmas got out of the car last and was immediately mobbed by a bunch of young men, seeking to wash the car for some small fee. In these parts, car washing was the unofficial security arrangement. Stingy car owners ran the risk of having their vehicles broken into and valuables stolen. Cosmas beckoned to one of the boys who had an empty water bucket stuck to his side and assigned him the job.

They walked to the shopping centre and entered a smoky refectory, full to the brim with lunch time dinners. This was the famous Wedewo Pacho—a bar, restaurant and night club, all in one—frequented by Olocho Football club fans. They settled at an empty table at the back. Immediately, a waiter rushed to their table and wiped it clean with a soapy hand cloth. The strong smell of the soap on the surface of the table kept flies at bay. Osolo made an impatient gesture to the waiter, “Get me a cold beer,” he said. “Make it two if you don’t mind.”

“We don’t serve beer unless you order lunch,” the young man bravely announced.

“What the hell are you talking about? Do you know us?” McOloo shouted, his irritation showing on his sweaty forehead.

“No,” the waiter responded.

“Well, you must have been employed only recently,” Cosmas added.

“Last week as a matter of fact. I am still new.”

“I figured as much,” said Osolo. “Then you don’t know us. We are customers and customers are always right.”

“We drink and eat, that is what we do. So, if you don’t mind,... get the hell out of our face and call Delilah. She will take care of us,” said McOloo, his voice grating with the angst of a starving lioness.

“All of us,” Osolo added, which sent everybody into loud laughter.

The dejected young man disappeared into the kitchen. In a short while, Delilah emerged from the inner cubicle with a tray full of drinks. She was a large woman—large in every way. Her stocky body and cumbrous bosom made her look like a huge ball and when

she walked, the three hundred and fifty pounds of flesh resting on plump legs, stomped on the ground like a Summo wrestler. She had no semblance of beauty, even in her youth. As she made her way to their table, a wide smile broke across her face.

"How are you boys doing?" she asked while placing her wares on the table.

"We are fine, Delilah," Osolo remarked, reaching for the nearest bottle of beer. "Delilah, *Absante Mama*," he added.

"What will you guys eat today?" she asked, smiling.

"Well, do you have *Spea*?" Amu asked.

"No, sweetheart. I don't have ribs today. I have *Nyama Choma* and *Kuku Frai*. I also have *Alot Nyaluo*. I cooked it myself."

They ordered a mixture of *Kuku Frai* and *Nyama Choma* with *Ugali*.

After Delilah went back to the kitchen, McOloo spoke. "I heard that the Ugandan who bought your house has disappeared into thin air," he said, looking at Amu.

Amu shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know about him. All I know is that my lawyer and the police are now reluctant to investigate the matter."

"I thought this was a clear case of fraud," said Cosmas.

"I thought so too. This morning, the CID told me that it is a domestic matter and not a criminal case."

"How can that be? That is why I think our system has fallen apart. This country is going to the dogs unless there is political change," McOloo asserted.

"Yes, that is what we need," Osolo concurred.

"But what will political change do?" Amu interjected. "Can it bring about matrimonial harmony? I don't think so. Moreover, in my case, if Sembe didn't take the matter to court, the lawyers could have not got their dirty hands on my property."

"Amu, political change will eliminate corruption—this is what I am saying," insisted McOloo.

"People will still act the same in a marriage, whoever the President is."

"Don't you believe that good political leadership could ensure equity, even between spouses?"

"That argument is far-fetched," Amu insisted. "The current systems will take time to change. For now and a long time to come, wives will enjoy ownership of property that belongs to their husbands as long as he, at one time said 'I do'."

"This is what I find very strange about women though," Cosmas said.

Amu asked, "What's strange about that?"

"You see, women can love and hate at the same time. Let me put it this way, they can love so much that they end up doing hateful things. You see, I don't know about Sembe, but I can tell you that women sometimes think that when they hurt you so painfully, you will miss their love. That is what is strange," explained Cosmas.

"I know. When I have a quarrel or misunderstanding with my wife, she brings up all the bad things that have happened between us, to make me feel bad," McOloo added in agreement.

Cosmas nodded his head. "So, a woman could end up destroying all the properties not because she doesn't have any feelings for the man, but because she seeks to inflict harm so that the man never ceases to think about her."

"I wonder why they do that? Don't they know that everything you do has a consequence?" Osolo wondered.

"Because they love more forcefully than we do. Perhaps, love is truly blind!" said Cosmas.

Amu, anxious to make a point, said, "I don't know what to say. Recently, Sembe has been trying to engineer some reconciliation meeting between my parents and hers. In fact she has been so preoccupied that I wonder whether she knows what's going on with our property."

"You see," Cosmas said. "The woman still loves you, I can bet on that. Look, she is beautiful, has a good job, she can have a man if she wants to. But, no,...not Sembe. She is clever enough to know that you still have some feelings for her, which is why you didn't marry Beth."

"I don't know whether I have feelings for her or not. What she has done is despicable. I could never imagine in a million years that a wife of mine could abandon the matrimonial home and then sell it."

"You never know what a woman can do—you just never know!" Osolo remarked.

A waiter brought their food and set it on the table. He cut the meat and the chicken into small pieces, sprinkled salt on the same and went back to fetch water, which he poured for each of them to wash their hands. As he was doing this, he asked whether they needed anything else. Osolo asked for hot pepper and McOloo wanted some gravy. The meat was steaming hot and so was the Ugali. When they finished the food and emptied the beer into their bellies, they were ready to leave. Amu asked to be dropped off at EAP in industrial area while the rest proceeded to town—Cosmas to the bank, Osolo to City Hall and McOloo to City Square Post Office.

That day, the top management of EAP was locked in a meeting for the whole morning. Everybody in the company knew that the main agenda was how to transfer some of the company's operation to Zimbabwe. There was another matter as well; that of streamlining the production department. It had become obvious that Amu, the Production Manager, was an under performer. Several warnings had been issued to him but no improvement was noted. Furthermore, Amu had unjustifiably assaulted a fellow staff member and caused him grievous bodily harm. Mr Musumba, the man under whose docket the department fell, was categorical that Amu should be replaced. In the end, the deliberations were carried by those who were in favour of getting rid of Amu. A dismissal letter was drafted in haste because both the Managing Director and the General Manager were leaving for Zimbabwe that afternoon.

After he was dropped off by his friends, Amu's intention was to slip into the office, pick up a few of his papers and then leave for the day. He felt some trepidation, given the poor attendance and tardiness that had earned him several reprimands and warnings. But, when he got there, Georgina Wamugunda, the Managing Director, Musumba, Peter Wanyonyi and Njuki were crowding around his reception desk. He knew that something was wrong. The week before, he had been involved in a fight with Kinuthia, the Head Foreman. In fact, he had hit the man on the head and badly bruised his face. However, he couldn't, by any stretch of imagination, expect the incident to have such a serious consequence as he found out after

he read the letter that was handed to him by the Managing Director. The company had dismissed him summarily without any benefits. Georgina explained to him that they were there to see that he left the company's premises immediately. Amu gathered his belongings quietly while the company's chiefs stood at his secretary's desk, chatting. Kioko dropped him off at home in the company's Pajero.

Though Sembe had questions about the sale and needed further clarification from Wanjia, she did not find time to pursue the matter because her mother sent word that she was coming to Nairobi. Allegedly, it was for treatment but she knew better. Sembe was the reason she was coming. After word reached home that Amu was living with another woman, her parents were frantic to have the dispute between them resolved. Recently, Jakwath Patroba Ndeda, Amu's father, had gone to her home to talk to her father. The two agreed that the matter should go before the elders. The onus was placed on Amu's father, first of all to arrange with his son a suitable date when a meeting could be held, and then communicate with his in-laws. Sembe was aware that in the unlikely event that the elders would decide to end the marriage, Amu would be given the option, either to take the children or to be refunded the bride-price. However, she was convinced that Amu would never even dream of having the children now, with his drunkenness and his lack of suitable accommodation. These did not worry Sembe any more than the current stalemate in their relationship. Any form of meeting that would afford an opportunity for them to talk to each other was all she desired.

Sembe got wind of what was going on from his brother, Tim, but that was a month ago. Perhaps, the plans were now afoot and her mother was coming to discuss them with her. She was anxious. On Wednesday of the week when her mother was supposed to come, Okola showed up in her office a few minutes before lunch time. He looked weary and a little upset about something.

"How are you?" she greeted him. "You look sick and tired."

"I am fine and so is everybody in my house. I have some news from home," he said.

“We are still expecting Mama?”

“No. She has taken ill with malaria so she is not coming. Here is father’s letter delivered to my office by a person who came in with the morning train.”

Sembe picked up the letter and perused it. Other than her mother’s illness, the letter had the usual demand for money to pay the hospital and buy medicine, and a reminder that they should find time to visit. She folded it and handed it back to her brother.

“Well, the letter does not mention it but I know the issue of my marriage was top on her agenda,” she said.

“I thought so, too. Anyway, now that you mention it, I heard that your house in Kileleshwa has been sold. It was such a beautiful house.”

“Yes, the lawyer sent me some money for it.”

“Whoever bought it has got such a beautiful piece of property,” Okola lamented.

“Only we do not know who it is. I called the lawyer a while ago to ask her who the buyer was and she said that she did not know. You see, the whole process went through so fast that I thought something wasn’t right.”

“Well, I heard some rumours. In fact, I am confused right now—you saying that you do not know the buyer. According to the rumours that I heard, some people think that you arranged for the property to be sold to your friend, Ayugi.”

“You mean Ayugi, my friend?”

“Yes. I understand her husband, the Ugandan, bought the property.”

“Nooo. It can’t be.”

“His company is called Mbale Enterprises. They are the new owners of your house.”

“How could Ayugi do that?”

“From what I heard, Amu was pretty upset about it. He thought you had arranged to give the property to your friend so that when he is out of the picture, you might take it back. He has reported the matter to the CID and lodged a complaint about the lawyer to the Law Society of Kenya. When I heard this, I thought I should alert you early enough to what is going on but, as I said, it is just rumours. You can check whether it is true.”

“Thanks for letting me know. I didn’t know anything. I was pretty upset about the whole thing. You see, the house was valued at twelve million and the lawyer sold it for only six million. Something was definitely wrong. Perhaps, I should find Amu and let him know the truth.”

“I think so. But that may be difficult because I hear he has been dismissed from his place of work. The man has been beside himself since the sale of the property.”

“Why would Ayugi do this to me? I thought we were friends. I am through with her. I don’t want to see her or her husband.”

“I understand how you feel. It looks pretty insidious to me if Ayugi didn’t talk to you about it. Let me go now. I hope you talk to the lawyer and get this thing straightened out.”

Sembe was stunned by the information. All along, she had trusted Ayugi and her husband. When they came to her, advising that she see Wanja, she never knew that it was part of a larger plan to take her house. Now, she remembered how Ayugi once virtually dragged her to go and sign affidavits for the property case. It was surprising to her that the lawyer had details of their land in Lambwe and even the Kayole plot when she had not given these to her. She couldn’t have given the list of properties to the lawyer because she was never after Amu’s property. As far as she was concerned, not a penny of hers went into their acquisition. She only wanted custody of her children and money for their education. But it was Ayugi, pushing and pulling, until she filed the case. And when the hearing date was set, Ayugi concocted a story that Amu was planning to marry Beth—a heinous lie that ensured her participation in the trial. So it was for the benefit of Ayugi and her Ugandan husband! She had been a fool. Amu was right to be upset with her. How she wished she had been a little more careful. She certainly needed to apologise to him. There was no question that the case had profoundly deepened the estrangement between them. While there was no possibility that he could regard her with remorse, she made up her mind to swallow her pride and apologise to him.

After her brother left, Sembe called Ogutu and gave her the information. Since Ogutu was the chairperson of *Bura*, she informed her that she no longer could be part of a group whose members were scheming to steal one another’s property. Ogutu asked her to

calm down and pleaded with her to reconsider her decision. Leaving *Bura* wasn't the answer to a problem that Ayugi had caused. Perhaps, Ayugi did not know what her husband was doing. Despite Ogutu's protestations, Sembe did not budge. She couldn't believe that Ayugi wasn't aware of what was going on. Ayugi was very much in the forefront of getting her to see the lawyer and sign the papers. If anything, her actions were more emphatic than her husband's.

When she finished with Ogutu, she called Rajabu. As usual, Rajabu had heard the story.

"I tell you, Sem, if somebody did that to me, I would kill them," she said. "I understand that the man, Toni, is also in the scheme. Can you imagine that he was cheating you at the same time that Ayugi was introducing him to Mary Oracha? That Ayugi, I don't like her at all. And, Sem, if she is still your friend, I am sorry for you."

"If you knew all of this, why didn't you tell me?"

"It was only yesterday when I heard of this. Rhoda told me."

Whatever Rhoda knew, was now all over town, Sembe thought.

"Perhaps, I should look for Amu so that I talk to him."

"That will be all right. But, where will you find him? I hear he was dismissed from EAP last week. That woman, Sally, left him and is now the fulltime girlfriend of the General Manager at EAP. That man, Amu, has more than paid for his sins, I tell you," Rajabu whined.

"I will find him, Rajabu. I will," Sembe said, her voice drowning deeply in melancholy.

After returning the receiver to its cradle, she sank into the sofa and gave herself up to speculation. She thought of a thousand things that she could do to Ayugi and her husband if they showed up in her office just then. Ayugi had been her best friend, how could she do this to her? Since that day, outside University of Nairobi's Taifa Hall, when they met for the first time while registering for their first-year classes, she had always trusted Ayugi. She from Tealand Girls and Ayugi from Kwal, were a pair, bound by unsophistication and newness to the city. Then, they needed each other to survive the sneer of girls from Ikulu House Girls, Excellent High and other schools around Nairobi. A friendship developed—a deep bond cemented by trust. When they graduated and left the university, the

friendship continued until Ayugi decided to poison it. She had problems with Amu, true, but they were no excuse for Ayugi and her husband to take their house.

That man, Amu, has more than paid for his sins. Rajabu's words rang a bell in her mind. From what she heard, Amu's life was falling apart and there was only one explanation for this; his inability to cope with the absence of his wife and children. She had a strong urge to call Amu, but where could she find him? She wanted to apologise to him and confess how much she needed him. Perhaps, if she could get hold of Kizito, she might be able to use him to track down Amu. Although she wasn't even sure Kizito would be willing to give any information, she picked up the phone anyway and called EAP. While she was waiting, she wondered whether she would still be able to recognise his voice. She had not spoken to him for about a year.

"Hello, this is Kizito. Who is calling?"

"It is me, K. How are you doing?"

"I am doing fine, *Min Lisa*. It has been a long time. How are the children?"

"They are fine. How is Kaunda and his mother?"

"Oh, they are fine. The other day, we were talking about you. I am glad that you are doing well. Did you hear that the TV and the VCR that you helped me to buy were stolen?"

"No, when did this happen?"

"Last month. We were asleep and when we woke up the next morning, the TV, gas cylinder and the VCR were gone."

"I am so sorry to hear that K. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Perhaps, I shall buy another one with this year's bonus, if I get one."

"That is very sad. You said that you were talking about me. Where was this?"

"Your *Dani* was in town."

"When?"

"Two weeks ago. She was here to chase away Sally from Hurlingham."

"Haaaaaa! That is very funny, K. Did she succeed?"

"Oh, yes. I was there with Susana. We made sure she left with all her things."

"You people are crazy! I can't believe it."

"You must. Now, she is not talking to me here at the office, but I don't care."

"What happened, K? Please tell me. I never knew that *Dani* was so harsh."

"Susana, *Dani* and I arrived at about ten o'clock in the morning. Amu was still asleep. Sally was out. When she came back, she found *Dani* there. *Dani* insisted that Sally move out. So, she packed her things and left, just like that."

"It serves her right. She didn't think that Amu was going to marry her or anything like that? By the way, that Sally must be a very powerful woman. Is she the one who made Amu lose his job?"

"No. It was the Managing Director. She does not like the *onagi* in the company. Now, she has got rid of all the senior managers and replaced them with her relatives."

"So, what was *Dani* saying about me?"

"Just that you are the only daughter-in-law she knows."

"Mmmmm. But, her son does not like me."

"That is not true."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"K, we should meet. I have really missed talking to you. Can you come home over the weekend to visit us? Val is always asking why Uncle Kizito does not visit us anymore."

"I can do that after Sabbath."

"Oh, that would be wonderful. Where is your cousin now that he doesn't have a job?"

"I haven't seen him."

"Well, when you see him, tell him his children really miss him. There is also an issue of importance that I wish to discuss with him. Please, ask him to call me."

"I will do that. Thanks so much, *Min Lisa*, for calling."

Sembe put down the phone, feeling a little excited. The information Kizito had given her needed to be analysed over lunch, and in the company of either Ogutu or Tabitha. Earlier, she had arranged to have lunch with Wanda Nyambok, a friend whose fortunes in the legal field declined after she was dismissed from a regional bank. Wanda had subsequently set up a small practice in

Fin House. Sembe knew Wanda when she was still married to the late Brian, Amu's friend. Now, she had to cancel her appointment with Wanda and, instead, look for Tabitha. The legal talk could wait for another day. She called Tabitha who agreed to meet her at Wigan. She picked up her handbag and flew off to the parking lot.

It was now official. John Kisa had disappeared and nobody knew where he was. Ayugi was devastated. At first, she thought he might be dead so, with the help of Ken Waswa, they searched all the morgues in the city and its environs, but to no avail. Then, they visited all the hospitals just in case he fell ill and was hospitalised, but they found nothing. They also checked the police stations, going as far as Thika, Athi River and Limuru, but not a single one had information about him. Ayugi had wanted to file a missing person's report with the police but Ken Waswa advised against it. If word got out that John was missing, the company might lose goodwill. The company had creditors who might close on their assets and strangle its operations, Ken had advised. Thus, for a month Ayugi suffered alone, crying most of the time but mostly praying to God for his return.

When she calmed down and collected her senses, she scoured all his documents and papers in his study, hoping to find information about his business and properties that might shed some light on his last moments at home. While nothing came up that could help in the search, what she discovered shocked her. Nearly all his properties were tied up in some kind of loan and the creditors were closing in. Although the details about the Runda house were scant, the little that she was able to dig up indicated that John was paying rent to some Asian company. It appeared that he never owned the house, its furniture or the many valuables in it. John was never honest and this realisation made her shiver. She had not come to terms with his disappearance yet, and now this. What was she going to do with no house and, probably, no money?

Bitterness rather than reason made her visit his office in International Trade House. While there, she went through the company documents, John's personal papers and whatever else she

could lay her hands on. Surprisingly, cheque books, bank statements or other financial documents were not in his drawers and she wondered whether they had anything to do with his disappearance. It also occurred to her that it might be worthwhile to ascertain the financial state of Mbale Enterprises just in case John never came back and she had to run the business. But, considering the information on debts and loans that she had gleaned from John's private papers, the company's finances were probably in a mess. Moreover, she was sure that Ken would provide the details whenever she needed them. She packed all his personal belongings and locked the office.

Before going home, she passed by Ogutu's office in Fimbo House. Ogutu was the chairperson of *Bura* so she felt obliged to let her know what was going on. She did not find her so she left a message. She also called Sembe from a public phone booth outside Fimbo house but found that she had gone out for lunch at Wigan. With frustration seeping through her every bone, she retrieved John's BMW from the basement of the International Trade House and drove it to Runda. At home, she went straight to bed.

From the corner of the bedroom, Ayugi heard her phone ringing. She raised her head and noticed that it was six thirty. She had been asleep for the whole afternoon. Not quite awake, she stretched her hand and grabbed it but it stopped ringing. When she came back from town, she had wanted to call Ken Waswa to ask for some money but decided against it, fearing it would send the wrong message. At this stage, it was probably too early to begin exposing her problems. She also called Sembe again, but her phone was engaged. Her intention was to invite Sembe and her children to visit her. She wondered how her friend was managing without Amu. John had told her that the sale of the property had worked out perfectly. Sembe probably got millions out of the house. Good for her! Now, she could collect the bits and pieces and put her life back on course. She hoped that Sembe would find happiness in her life without Amu. Was this not what every woman had to do eventually? Sleep had relieved her mind of these thoughts.

The phone rang again and, this time, she grabbed it just in time. "Hello, Ayugi," the sweet voice of Ogutu sounded so near.

"I am fine, girl. Do you know how many times I have been trying to get hold of you?"

"Sorry. I got your message. I was out for lunch with some friends. I also wanted to talk to you very much but let me hear you first. What is going on with you?"

"Mine is a long story. Tell me yours first."

"Well, it is not a very happy one. It is about Sembe. She called me to say that she is leaving Bura."

"Why?"

"Because of you. She says that your husband and the lawyer connived to take her house in Kileleshwa. Ayugi, is it true that you bought Sembe's house without telling her?"

"I know that my husband was helping her with the lawyer and all that but I didn't know that he had bought the house. I swear to God I did not know that John was interested in buying the house. I could have stopped him."

"Well, Sembe is very upset now and so is her husband. I understand that the lawyer was involved too so Amu reported the matter to the police."

"Please, Ogotu, I had nothing to do with any of this. I didn't know John could be so cold blooded. Sembe is my friend and I have always wanted the best for her. How could all this have happened? Please, tell Sembe that I had nothing to do with it."

"I thought I should bring it to your attention and see whether there is something that can be done about it. You see, good friends don't do this to each other."

"I swear, I didn't know about it. Speaking of doing something about it, John and I are no longer together."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he left home a month ago and nobody has heard of him since."

"Did he go back to Uganda?"

"I honestly don't know, Ogotu."

"This is serious, Ayugi. Have you reported it to the police?"

"At first, we thought he was arrested or he fell ill. I have been to all the police stations, hospitals and morgues. He has just disappeared, Ogotu. I don't know what to do. Today I went to his office and brought all his personal things home. I am ...I am so ...

afraid, Ogutu...I am so afraid..." She started to cry. "I wanted to report the matter straight away but Ken Waswa said it is not good for business. Ken thought John might show up but a month has passed and we haven't heard of him. He might be dead..."

"I don't think so. John is a businessman. Perhaps, he is held up somewhere."

"I don't like it, Ogutu. I really don't like everything I see, read and hear. His business wasn't in good standing and, now, with him trying to take my friend's property....It just doesn't look good."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet. I need my friends. Please, I beg you, Ogutu, talk to Sem. Ask her not to leave *Bura*; it is the only thing some of us have now. I know she hates me but let her know that I had no knowledge of it and I would never do anything to hurt her."

Ayugi was distressed by this news, more so because it meant the end of *Bura*. Her heartless husband had ruined the bond of friendship between her and people who meant more to her than blood relatives. When she and Sembe were at college, they made a commitment to each other that their relationship would never be affected by men, however handsome or rich. It pained her a great deal that she was the one breaching the commitment by letting John interfere with this bond. If John ever came back, he would pay for this. She would see to it that he does. She rose and went to the study. Her intention was to go through his documents again just in case there was information about her friend's house or even the title deeds. She would take these back to the owner. She searched in haste but found nothing. She sat on the carpet and rested her head against the wall. Her world was collapsing and there was nothing she could do.

Chapter Twenty

THE RAIN CAME again with thunderous blasts that caused a power blackout. The darkness and the sound of the rain aroused him. He lay back on the mattress, his thoughts drowning in despondency. Not only was his life miserable, the people he had assisted in their hour of need had turned their backs on him. He thought of Sally and grimaced at his lack of foresight. The girl had come to him not because of love, but because of the material comfort he seemed so ready to provide. It was all too obvious that their relationship wasn't going to survive even if his mother did not intervene. Sally was the type of woman who could never stay after his job became history. She would have come to the house when he was still enjoying his feat at Mama Nitilie, taken all that was hers, including a few that were not, and vanished into thin air. Not even a note would she care to write, bidding him goodbye and even thanking him for the hospitality. It must have been Providence that brought his mother to town. At least, she redeemed him from the shackles of a rapacious woman who was bent on pilfering his money and upsetting his peace.

He now realised how sheltered he had been with Sembe. She was a dependable companion, quick to reprimand his foibles but unquestionably loyal to the family. Although she took pride in his achievements and bathed in the opulence that his money provided, she never demanded more than he could afford. The house in Kileleshwa and the big cars they drove were acquired, not at her behest, but of his own volition. She wasn't extravagant or flashy like most women in her rank. She understood when he did not have money and was never ashamed of his failures. Most of all, she loved him. Sembe was perfect and he had been a fool to think that his life could gain any coherency without her. Strange, was it not, that he nurtured a romantic and proud memory of her after all they had been through. But, memory was all what was left of his life after his

wife and he made a mess of their marriage. If there was one thing that he wanted to change in this world, it was the current state of estrangement from his wife. Perhaps, it was the desperation to love and be loved again that was making him nostalgic about the past. But, if it were desperation alone, he could have been satisfied with Sally. There were also feelings, the same that had absorbed him so completely the very first time he set eyes on her at that party in Langata. He had performed better then, even succeeded in wooing her into his life. Now, things were different and, although the feelings were still there, perhaps even more entrenched and full of experience, the possibility of winning her back was almost non-existent. How he wished things could be different. He had made mistakes, true but, surely, had he not suffered enough? Why was it so difficult to erase the shadow of a hideous past and begin afresh?

After what seemed like hours of looking at the ceiling, he drifted off to sleep. When he woke up, it was Sunday morning. He dragged his tired body off the mattress and, while ignoring the slight headache and vertigo, disappeared into the bathroom. The pungent smell from the toilet made him squint as his urine hit the stagnant and coloured mixture of liquid at the bottom. He washed his face with plain water and then combed his hair while peering into the mirror. His face looked terrible. A small patch of white hair on the left side of his head reminded him that old age was creeping on him. As he left the bathroom, his attention was drawn to a photograph of Sally, hanging prominently outside the bathroom—the same photograph that his mother had removed from the wall a few months ago. It was strange that he couldn't remember putting it back. He jerked the picture from the wall and crushed it beneath his feet. "Bastard!" he said. Feeling hungry, he strode to the kitchen, hoping to find some bread or cold Ugali. The dusty portable gas cooker and two dirty pans that had been flung carelessly into the sink were cold reminders that nothing edible had been produced in that kitchen for days. Below the kitchen top, the cabinet doors were ajar, exposing chunks of rotting *Sukuma Wiki* and smelly leftovers. He fumbled around, closing one cabinet door here and opening another there, and then gave up. Frustrated by the bareness of his kitchen, he went back to his bedroom and put on a shirt and the only pair of Jean trousers that he had. He put a hand on his left

pocket to feel the two hundred shillings that Osolo had given him. Satisfied that his riches were intact, he walked out of his apartment and locked the door behind him.

He descended the staircase and then turned into the passage leading to the back entrance of the building. Walking hurriedly to avoid contact with either the caretaker or his children, he reached to the door and slipped outside. The green lawn at the back of the building spread to the edge of the compound, marked by a low *Kayaba* fence. He jumped over the fence and was immediately on a small path leading towards the main road. He wanted to get something to eat and possibly look at the Sunday newspaper. This is why he walked towards the shopping centre. Within fifty metres, he branched left and hurried towards the cardboard kiosks where a glass of tea and *Bandika* would cost a soul just under ten shillings. He went into one of them and sat on the wooden bench near the window. The waitress brought a glass of tea without asking. “*Nipe Bandika*,” he told her after she awkwardly placed the glass of tea on the table. In a moment, she came back with a two huge slices of bread clumsily stuck together with a thick spread of *Blue Band* margarine. He munched his breakfast quietly, contemplating his plans.

He needed money very urgently but, so far, he did not have any idea of how to get it. He had been to all his friends and they were now tired of him. Some of them had instructed their secretaries to turn him away whenever he showed up at their place of work. The prospects of finding a job did not look good at the moment and his bills were piling up. What was worrying him most was the rent. Already, he was three months in arrears and the landlord had asked him to vacate the building but he was still holding on, hoping that money would come from somewhere. Having exhausted all his options and feeling completely defeated, he thought of no other alternative but to approach his wife. The woman had a very generous pay package from the World Bank project and had only recently pocketed almost half a million from the sale of his house. Surely, she would not mind parting with a few thousands, if only to rescue the father of her children.

When he left the kiosk, he walked back to Hurlingham shopping centre. He stopped at the newspaper vendor and settled on *The Voice*. The young man was used to him, thus, he did not bother to

give him the usual warning not to fold the newspaper. *The Voice* carried the story of John Kisa, the businessman, who had disappeared without a trace. Now, the police had found his wristwatch and a wallet. Also, there was speculation that he could have been murdered. The picture of Ayugi, her eyes swollen with tears, was displayed on the front cover. “Bitch!” he said, replacing the paper on the heap. Not bothering to say “thank you”, he stood up and walked towards Claremont Hospital. He was ready to confront one of his worst fears—meeting Queen Sembe. As he passed by Maji Mazuri Hotel, he remembered how he once spent a night there with Beth. In those days, he could afford the luxury of a two star hotel but, now, everything that he saw, reminded him of what he had lost.

In thirty minutes, he was in the Upper Hill area. He could remember the location of the house despite the developments that were taking place around there. As he drew nearer, about two houses away, a deep surge of nostalgia seeped through his veins. Vivid memories of the good old days came alive; the days when his arrival would send the girls screaming and running towards him, competing for his attention; when their mother would stand at the door, smiling in disguised anticipation. Was there a possibility that his family could be together again? He definitely still loved his wife and children, not out of desperation, but true love. He did not know whether he would ever get the chance to explain this to Sembe. Each time an opportunity presented itself, the male chauvinist pig inside him had the better of him. Was this the time to apologise and beg for her love? Even as his mind rejected this hope as pure fantasy, his deepest feelings wanted it to come true. He panicked. Suddenly, he had misgivings about whether Sembe would be enthralled by his visit. He was dirty and smelly, had no job or a prospect of finding one and he was utterly broke. Very few women would be willing to give up their pride to rescue a loser like him.

Undecided about what to do and overcome by the discomfort of betraying his conscience, he lingered at the intersection a few metres away from her gate. Still reticent about the prospect of his visitation, he wondered what might be the source of her indignation this time. It was now about three years since they were separated and there wasn’t anything to fight about. He had given her the

children and let her sell the house. Surely, she had no reason to shun him even if he showed up at her door unexpectedly as he was about to. Propelled by sheer restlessness, he walked to the gate, but couldn't muster the courage to press the door-bell. He stood there for a moment and then walked to the next intersection. A few minutes of contemplation sent him back again to make another attempt. This time, he was accosted by a security guard who came from inside the gate. "I saw you walk past the gate. Now, this is the second time. Is there somebody you want?" he asked.

Amu stopped and looked at him. "No, I lost my way."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I wanted to go to Nyatta Hospital," Amu replied nervously. "Where is the short cut?"

The guard stared at him in confusion at first and then walked towards the road. "Well, just go straight then turn right," he said, pointing to a long stretch of road.

Amu nodded in agreement. "*Absante*," he said and began to walk away.

The guard was suspicious. He probably thought he was a burglar or a crook of some sort. He stood there, watching, until Amu disappeared around the bend. Amu also hurried to get out of his sight. Despite the setback, his determination to make contact with Sembe wasn't subdued. Since going to her house was temporarily exigent, he decided to write her a note. This could, after all, be the best way to gauge her feelings about him. He walked to Nyatta Hospital and purchased an envelope and paper from a kiosk near the bus stop. He wrote a letter requesting for money to enable him pay his rent. He informed her that he had called at her house but was ashamed to gain entry because his physical state wasn't good. Since he did not have a phone, he would wait for her near the entrance to Maji Mazuri Hotel for about one hour. He concluded by saying that she was his last hope and he was sorry about everything. He delivered the note to the security guard who was more than surprised to see him again, and asked him to pass the note to the person whose name was on the envelope.

Amu walked back to Maji Mazuri Hotel. He stood at the gate, taking time to admire its brick paving. He found a grassy patch beside it and sat down. He waited for two hours but Sembe did not

show up. He decided to wait for another hour. When she did not come, he rose and strolled back to his apartment in Hurlingham. His misgivings were prescient—Sembe had no interest in seeing him again.

When he got to his apartment, he was surprised to find a big lock on the door. The neighbour's children informed him that the landlord had been there, looking for him. He went downstairs to the caretaker's apartment. There was a letter for him from a lawyer, informing him that "distress" had been levied on his property for non payment of rent. He could redeem the property within fourteen days if he paid all the amounts that were due. There was another letter, giving him fifteen days' notice to vacate the apartment. The caretaker refused to let him into the apartment so that he could at least take his documents. He asked him to come on Monday when the landlord would be around.

Amu's life was thrown into disarray. The hopelessness of his situation made him feel as though the sky had suddenly fallen on him. He thought of going back to Sembe but quickly dismissed the idea. If the woman refused even to answer his note, what good would it be to bother her at the house? If Auntie Didi was around, he would certainly have gone to her place. Moreover, he would not be suffering like this. The only other relative he could go to was his cousin, Nyabari, in Ndola. It had been a long time since he saw them, let alone visited. However, it was his best bet. He walked down to Lango Road and took the route 58 bus. Being a Sunday, the bus was almost empty except for a group of young people at the back who were yelling on top of their voices about a football game they were going to play.

He got off the bus at the shops in High End Estate. Then, he walked along the path separating the vast High End Phase Three and Phase Two. He crossed the railway line and Outer Ring Road to enter Ndola from the west. He easily found the house where he had lived with his cousin many years ago and quickly knocked on the door. The bare-chested man who opened the door informed him that his cousin had moved out a couple of months ago. He was distraught. Not knowing where else to go, he wandered around the estate for a little while, waiting to catch a bus. Having decided that he was going to Osolo's place in Kimbo, he walked to a nearby kiosk and bought

some chewing gum. While lost in thought, somebody touched him on his back. It was Swara, a driver at EAP, who had been sacked due to drunkenness. He was a little drunk even now.

“*Mzee*, I did not recognise you at first. How are you?” Swara said with a delighted smile.

Amu turned his head and smiled at him. “Fine Swara,” he said in a polite and ingratiating tone that Swara might have least expected. “I came to see my cousin who used to live in D 5 but I found he has moved.”

“Oh, are you going back?”

“Yes.”

“Do you live here?”

“No. I have only come to this side to see a friend called Njoroge. He usually keeps some stuff for old men like me.”

“It must be good stuff. Where is he?”

Swara’s eyes lit up with joy. He moved closer to Amu as though to whisper in his ear and asked, “*Mzee*, do you also take it? I tell you, Njoro has the best.”

If there was anything Amu needed at that moment, it was a little of that potent *chang’aa* drink. He had been through a lot in one day and needed to calm his nerves. Moreover, he had some money in his pocket. But, he wasn’t going to stay long since he needed to get to Osolo’s house before dark. Njoro’s place wasn’t far from the road, just a little way down near the swamp overlooking the Caltex petrol station at the junction. Njoro’s stuff wasn’t half as potent as Mama Nitilie’s in Ndondosha, but it was good. It got them talking about their experiences at EAP. Amu decided to leave Njoro’s place at around eight in the evening. He was drunk but his gait was steady. He resolved to walk all the way to Kimbo since, in his judgement, it wasn’t very late.

The night was quiet and human traffic on the usually busy path was subdued. He could hear the throbbing of his heart and the clatter of his feet hitting the ground as he walked. It was a dangerous place to be at that time, and the alcohol in his system wasn’t making him as valiant as he needed to be. He hummed a tune and whistled loudly so as to subdue his fear. It was dark but the lights from the petrol station illuminated most of the area. As he attempted to cross the railway line, he heard movement to the right. A sense of

fear gripped his body so he stopped. The still and quietness of the night was deceptive. He scanned his surroundings, hoping to see a human being or a stray dog but noticed neither. It was probably the wind shaking the scant vegetation. He started to walk again and, this time, a little faster. Then, he heard the noise again and, almost immediately, something hit his head so hard that he thought his jaw was going to crack. He was being attacked. In the dark, he could see the silhouette of one of his attackers emerging from the darkness. He was approaching him with a plank of wood or something of that nature and raising it, ready to strike again. Amu lifted his left hand to ward off the attack and the plank landed thunderously on it. He tried to run but somebody held his neck from behind. The attacker continued to rain blows on his body until he could stand it no more. As he fell down, he felt a stab in his stomach. He fainted.

When he came to his senses, he felt blood oozing out of his abdomen. His head was so painful, his eyes could hardly see. He tried to lift his left hand but he couldn't. The sharp pain in his elbow was definitely as a result of a fracture. He also discovered that he was virtually naked. The robbers had taken his clothes, shoes and his wristwatch. He struggled to stand upright then, holding his left arm carefully, he staggered towards High End. He walked slowly, lifting his legs one at a time, struggling to create a distance between himself and Ndola. The excruciating pain in his arm and abdomen were so inundating that he hardly felt the chill of the morning wind beat on his bear skin.

He entered High End, his cold body completely drained of strength. He needed to find a place where he could at least seek help and, maybe, lie down for a while. But, it was a long time since he had lived in High End and, in his current state, everything looked the same. He followed a bend around a long line of houses and came to a school. Next to the school fence, he saw a gate which looked familiar. It was Brian's house—the late Brian. Perhaps, Miriam was still living there, he thought. He proceeded to the gate and knocked several times. He was almost despairing when somebody turned on the lights in a bedroom upstairs. He knocked again. In a short while, he heard people talking. Then, a person came down and turned on all the lights, including the security lamp at the gate. Amu remembered that he was stark naked so he hid on the side of the fence.

“Who is there?” the voice of a man called out.

“My name is Amu Ndeda. I have been robbed and I am naked. Kindly get me a cloth or a towel.”

“Did you say Amu?”

“Yes.”

“Amu who?”

“Amu Ndeda.”

“Wait a minute.”

The man went back inside. When he came back, he was carrying a bed sheet and a woman was following him from behind. She was Miriam. When they got him into the house, they were stunned. He had a swollen head, a broken left arm and a very bad wound on his abdomen. His body was shaking uncontrollably, suggesting that he might have sustained some internal injuries. Miriam panicked. She had encountered death once and could fathom the deep sense of loss that it engendered. She wanted to take him to hospital straight away but couldn't decide which one. Also, most hospitals in Nairobi demanded hefty deposits before they would admit a patient and she did not have any money in the house. Perhaps, it was advisable to seek help from his relatives but this could only be done in the morning. Since it was about five o'clock and the light of dawn was just setting in, she decided to clean his wounds and smarten him up. By seven o'clock in the morning, he was all cleaned up and dressed in Brian's corduroy jeans and a shirt. Amu could hardly talk by this time. The only one of Amu's relatives whom Miriam knew was Kizito. She called him at EAP and, within a few minutes, he arrived with Kioko in a company pick up. They decided to take him to Sister Mary Nursing Home in Andora, a few kilometres from where Kizito lived.

Georgina Wamugunda looked out of the window and saw Kibotho crossing over the fence to his Alfa Romeo which was parked on the road. He was a tall stallion of a man, six feet two, wide shoulders and a face as fearful as that of an Alsatian hound. He was the man known around Nairobi, Limuru, Nyeri and Othaya as a “Kamaliza”. If you needed a debt repaid, a business partner

eliminated, an accomplice silenced or your wife's lover maimed, or simply your boss reminded of simple rules of courtesy to employees, Kibotho was your man. He did not mind getting his hands dirty. You needed a job done and you could afford the price, the deal was on. He never chose his customers; you could be his client today and a victim tomorrow. Kibotho wasn't at all bothered. This was the man that Njuki had recommended for the job—to avenge John Kisa's treachery. Njuki also volunteered to make the initial contact. Kibotho demanded a hefty sum of fifty thousand of which ten thousand was payable upfront, the rest at the completion of the job. Today, Kibotho had come for his final payment since the job was accomplished.

Georgina did not want to be personally involved other than to provide the finance that was needed. But, she was curious to see the man whose reputation alone sent chills down many people's spines. She had come with Njuki to Muranga but remained in the hotel. Now that she had seen him, she did not know whether she was afraid of him or not. For her, a task had been completed and that is all that mattered. When Njuki came back, an envelope full of photographs in hand, Georgina was ready to leave. She asked him to destroy the photographs.

Ordinarily, she would not go home for lunch but today was different. She wanted to eat something from her kitchen. The woodwork had recently been redone and a breakfast bar erected to separate the main dining area and the kitchen. The black and white marble tiles on the floor and a matching stone kitchen worktop had an inviting appeal to all who sought to spend time there. For Sembe, it was one part of the house that was a pleasurable reminder of Kileleshwa. The short drive would also give her an opportunity to reminisce on her past and focus on her current troubles. After Ayugi's treachery, Toni's marriage to Oracha and her leaving *Bura*, much of her life was devoted to her children and her home. Although she had decided to pursue Amu, she had not made any tangible steps to locate him. Before, such an effort would be curtailed by the censorship of her friends. But now that she had abandoned *Bura*,

she was no longer burdened with the fear of their scrutiny. It was the lingering pride, perhaps, seduced by the thought that Amu's arrogance would, ultimately, be displaced by his dire financial needs and that he would have nobody to turn to except her that froze her efforts. He was bound to come home, even if it were just for survival. Also, her hopes were on Kizito. When he came to visit her a few weeks ago, he pledged to look for Amu and talk to him. Probably what she needed to do when she returned to the office was to call him.

As she entered the house, she saw a letter lying on the table. Her name was on the envelope and the handwriting seemed familiar.

"Auntie, who brought this letter?" she asked the maid.

"The day watchman. He said a man gave it to him yesterday when we were at church but he forgot it in his pocket so he brought it this morning."

"Oh!" she sighed while opening the letter. "What do you have for lunch?"

"Some vegetables and a little of that fish from yesterday. Can I prepare Ugali and warm them for you?"

"Yes," she said her eyes still glued to the letter. When she finished reading it, she disappeared into the bedroom. In there, she sat on the bed wondering about what had become of Amu after she did not show up. Because he did not find her, he was probably thrown out of his flat. She was terrified at the thought that this was happening to Amu at the same time that his house was sold through unscrupulous deals by a person she considered a friend. She regretted her part in the whole scheme and hoped that she would get an opportunity to apologise to him. Her conscience was appeased by the fact that she had taken steps to mitigate the losses. A few weeks ago, she and Okola had paid Wanja Peters a visit. The lawyer was very apologetic. She claimed no knowledge of Mbale Enterprise's connection to John Kisa. Wanja gave her all the documents and even offered to testify against John if Sembe sued him. After that, she had instructed Wanda Nyambok to bring a suit against Wanja, John and Mbale Enterprise for the recovery of the property. Wanda informed her that chances for success would be more than doubled if Amu joined in the suit. However, she was hesitant to give Amu any such information because it might appear that she only needed him for the case. Now, Amu was reaching out to her. She felt the

vague uneasiness about her life, especially since the possibility of getting back the property and her husband at the same time looked very real. What a waste of time it had been, fighting in the courts over property when she could have just relaxed and cared for her children. The fighting had eaten into her, leaving her limp and exhausted, and needing... oh, so very badly, warmth and love.

When she came back to the kitchen, she wasn't hungry anymore. She frowned at the food on the table and walked out. At the gate, she had a word with the security guard. The man was sorry about the letter. He got off with a light warning.

As she drove back to the office, she wondered whether Amu was really as bad as she had thought. But, could she have gone to meet him yesterday? While she couldn't fathom how seeing him again would affect her, she knew it would have been impossible to resist the temptation. Perhaps, it wasn't because of love that he had come to her but because he was broke. A broke brother can be very loving, sometimes! She glanced at the note on her lap. At the bottom, he had written that he was sorry. What did he mean by this? What was he sorry about? Was he sending her a message? She wondered about what might have crossed his mind before he did the note. She knew him to be a very proud man, not quite disposed to admitting fault. But, this time, it was different and she could feel it. He was begging to be loved, to be nurtured in the same way that it used to be three years ago. It was a pity that she did not see him yesterday. She, too, relished those days and wondered whether it could ever be the same. Oh, how she longed to hear him whisper, "Sem, I love you so much." She could do anything to make it happen again.

She pulled into the office parking lot fifteen minutes early. As she approached her office, she had a premonition of him waiting for her. She felt a little relieved and disappointed at the same time when she found nobody at her reception desk. By the time she sat down, she had made up her mind to look for Amu. It was important that she talk to him, make him aware that his wife and children needed him at home. How special it would be for her family to be together again! She was going to call Cosmas, Osolo and Kizito and ask them desperately to help her to track him down. She was going to take the initiative this time, no matter what people might say.

She had been in the office for about thirty minutes when her friend, Ogutu, walked in. Ogutu shuffled her plump frame to a seat near the window. "Sem, how have you been?" she asked.

"Good. How about you?"

"I am doing well." Ogutu rested her arms on her lap and looked at Sembe straight in the face. "Sem, I have come to brief you about our *Bura* of yesterday."

Sembe held up her hand. "But I thought I sent a letter, resigning from *Bura*."

"This is precisely why we had a meeting yesterday," Ogutu said, attempting a smile.

"To discuss my resignation?" Sembe quizzed.

"We love you, Sembe, and we still want you," Ogutu begged, a spirit of affability showing all over her face.

"But, I cannot be in *Bura* with a woman who claims to be my friend and then conspires with a lawyer to sell my children's house. Do you know what that house meant to my husband? When I think of it, I feel sick. Probably, Amu and I would still be together if Ayugi wasn't my chief adviser. It is because of her that I have lost everything. Her actions were inconsiderate and heartless. I shouldn't be asked to stay in her company. It is unfair, Ogutu." Her voice trailed off. It seemed unpleasant even to discuss the matter.

Ogutu did not want to be brushed aside just like that. The two, Sembe and Ayugi, were her best friends. She believed that the responsibility of repairing the misunderstanding between them rested on her shoulders. "That is a very strong impression, Sem," she intoned. "You don't hate her that much. You just think you do but you don't."

"Oh, nonsense!" Sembe said in exasperation. "I hate her now more than ever. I hope never to see her again."

After a moment of awkward silence, Ogutu looked at Sembe, her head bobbing up and down. "Don't say that, Sem," she beseeched. "Well, Ayugi is coming here to apologise to you. According to her, she did not know that her husband had any connection at all with that lawyer."

"She knew the woman was at college with John. They were friends for heaven's sake. Anyway, I don't want to talk to her, Ogutu, and I don't want to be in *Bura* as long as she is still there."

"Just consider what Ayugi has been through with her husband disappearing and all that. Do we need to abandon her now?"

"No, Ogutu...think of what she and her husband did to me. Is my family not important? Is my life not important? How about the future of my children? No, Ogutu. I feel for her and all that, but that is all I can do right now. I think it is better that she and I don't have anything in common."

"Sem...please," Ogutu begged.

Their conversation was interrupted by the sharp ring of the telephone. As Sembe picked up the receiver, Ayugi also walked in and sat down. An eerie feeling of mistrust overhung the office, making Ogutu twitch her face and turn her frame from side to side. She had arranged the meeting but wasn't quite prepared to deal with the dour disposition of her two friends. There was no question that Sembe was the most difficult to console. She was a woman who had seen and lived suffering. Despite the stoicism that was discernible on the outside, Sembe's inside was hurting. Ayugi, on the other hand, was a motherly woman, a comfortable housewife whose predisposition was singularly inclined toward pleasing an absentee husband. Now, both women were interlocked in a fledgling battle, all out of an invidious scandal precipitated by the absentee husband. If truth be said, *Bura* had never been confronted with such a scandal since its inception and certainly not when Ogutu was its chairperson. She couldn't even remember a time when members debated openly and seriously about one member's betrayal of another. Such things never happened in *Bura*. Their disputes were on the mundane side, mostly arising out of gossip and rumour—trivialities, for which a mere apology was enough to mollify the anger and bring back smiles on the faces of the disputants. Not this one.

Sembe neither cringed nor acknowledged the arrival of Ayugi. She carried on with her telephone conversation as though nothing had happened. "Hello," she said. "Yes, this is she."

The conversation went on for a while. When she finished, her mood changed. "It is about Amu" she told them. "He is in hospital. He was attacked by thugs. He is unconscious."

"Good Lord!" Ogutu shouted. "Where is he?"

“At Sister Mary Nursing Home in Andora. I must go and see him right now,” Sembe said while suppressing tears. She quickly arranged the papers on the table, shoved some into a lockable cabinet standing against the wall and others in a huge folder lying on top of her desk. She pulled out one of her desk drawers and removed her handbag. She placed it on the table as she stood up to adjust her skirt.

“I will take you,” Ayugi said, standing up, as well.

“No, you will not. Amu does not want to see you and neither do I,” Sembe curtly replied.

“But...” Ayugi attempted to say something but Sembe had no time to argue. She grabbed her handbag and ran to the parking lot. Ogutu followed her. When Sembe climbed into the car, Ogutu jumped in beside her and they drove off in the direction of the city centre.

Ayugi stood by the entrance, watching the unfolding in utter amazement. She saw the Toyota drive away and felt the overwhelming urge to follow it. She shook her head, tugged the hem of her skirt and went to her car. Sembe and Ogutu were the only friends she had in the whole wide world and now, they too, did not want anything to do with her. She realised just how much her husband’s treachery had damaged the trust that her friends had in her. She wanted to talk to Sembe, explain what happened and ask for forgiveness. How she wished Sembe would give her a chance, at least to say that she was sorry. And, now, with John’s disappearance and possible death, perhaps she needed Sembe more than Sembe needed her. She pulled out of the lot but, instead of heading west towards Runda, she found herself following the Toyota.

Neither Sembe nor Ogutu had been to Sister Mary Nursing home before. They relied on the directions given by Kizito. After branching off Limpopo Road, a small road led them to a huge field that spread towards a dry valley. Beyond the valley, the sprawling Kabangi slums and the outskirts of Runji Dairy Holdings were visible. A gradual descent brought them through a labyrinth of buildings, some with their roofs hanging menacingly above the road, and to the gate with the sign of Sister Mary Nursing Home conspicuously displayed. Unlike the surroundings, the nursing home had a clean well-kept grassy fringe of iridescent green. The gravel driveway, lined by lush thickets of bougainvillea plants, led directly to a big building with a

pointed brick façade, which stood at the centre of the compound. One got the impression that the building was once a home but had been remodelled into a medical facility. A narrow veranda gave way to an open double door and a reception counter. They found Kizito and his wife, Susana, talking to a nurse in the reception area. He walked them to the ward, while updating them on what he knew.

Amu's emaciated body lay on a wooden bed. He was covered to his chest by a thin blanket with the nursing home logo printed on it. It was difficult to tell whether he was alive or not. He had a huge bandage wrapped around his head and his left arm was supported in a sling. Sembe sat by Amu's bed and watched him sleep. The grief that had been bottled up inside her since she got the news poured out in intermittent sobs. Susana joined her. It was, indeed, an emotionally wrenching moment for all of them. Kizito stood motionless, watching Sembe and Susana crying. When the paroxysm subsided and Sembe calmed down, Kizito removed a white handkerchief from his pocket and handed to her. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "I am sorry, K," she said.

"No problem," he consoled. "*Semeji*, I think Amu needs to be transferred to a bigger hospital because his injuries are extensive and his condition is deteriorating rapidly. This place cannot provide the specialized medical attention that he needs."

Sembe collected herself. "K, have you talked to the doctor?"

"I don't think there are doctors in this place, *Semeji*. I have only seen nurses and the matron."

"Can we go talk to the matron?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I have just seen her go to the next ward."

They found the matron in one of the wards, attending to a patient. She was a shambling, overweight and compassionate woman of about forty who seemed to enjoy her work immensely. Whatever nuggets of disconsolation she might have experienced, were well hidden in her amiable personality. She greeted them with a smile, a commodity she seemed to have in abundance and ushered them to the hallway. After a brief discussion, the matron obliged. "But, which hospital are you thinking of taking him to?" she asked.

"Westlands," Sembe replied.

“Oh, well, that will be fine. We require that you pay all the bills and get a confirmation from Westlands that they have a bed before we can release him,” the matron explained.

They were still engulfed in conversation when Ayugi joined them. Obviously, she had followed Sembe’s car to the nursing home but had remained outside the gate. Ayugi started to cry even before setting eyes on Amu. And when she got to his bedside, her face was wet. It wasn’t clear to Ogutu whether she was crying about the disappearance of her husband or Amu’s injury. Ogutu was discomfited by the urge to know what Ayugi was going through. What had become of John? She wanted to ask but did not want to appear impolite. Instead, she became restless and, when she couldn’t bear it anymore, she pulled Ayugi outside to have a word with her.

Sembe, left with Kizito and Susana, felt a little relieved. Silently, she thanked Ogutu for getting rid of the pest. What Ayugi had done to her was despicable and she had not found in her heart, any space for forgiveness. She wished Ayugi could just leave her alone instead of trying to obfuscate her treachery with a smidgen act of penitence. Ayugi was the reason all the bad things had happened to her, she thought, and tears or no tears she would never be her friend again.

In the parking lot Ogutu sought to know what was going on. Ayugi leaned against her and cried so very intensely. For minutes, Ogutu just stood there, holding her friend. When the tears stopped, Ayugi stood upright and wiped her face. “It is John,” she said. “They found his watch and wallet. John is dead...what am I going to do?”

“Did they find him?”

“No.”

“Where did they find these things?”

“In Msitu Forest. He is dead, Ogutu. Don’t you see? He was murdered!”

“No, you can’t say that for sure until the body is found.”

“Oooh, my God, what I am going to do?”

Ayugi started to wail. Passers-by must have thought that her patient had died in the nursing home.

“Calm down, Ayugi. He is not dead. Please get into the car and I will take you home.”

Ogutu left Ayugi in the car and went back inside. She found Sembe massaging Amu's arm. She went over to her side as though to whisper something.

"What is going on, Ogutu?" Sembe asked.

"It is about Ayugi."

Sembe shrugged, "What about her? I told you I don't want to talk to her."

"It is John. They found his watch and wallet somewhere in Msitu Forest. He could have been murdered."

"What?" Sembe asked, bewildered.

"John could be dead. I am going with Ayugi, to be with her for now. I know that Amu will get better. Take your time and if you need anything, anything at all, just call me and I will come. I have to go now."

"Thanks, Ogutu."

Sembe was surprised at the turn of events but her mind was more preoccupied with Amu. His condition seemed to worsen by the minute. She knew of no other alternative but to have him transferred to a bigger hospital. With Ogutu gone and her still suspicious of other *Bura* members, the only other friend she could count on was Rajabu. She walked to a nearby telephone booth and called her. Luckily, Rajabu was at home. As usual, Rajabu was more than sympathetic about her situation. "I will be there," Rajabu said, after she was told of what had happened. In a space of about twenty minutes, Rajabu arrived with her two brothers and arrangements to transfer Amu to Westland Hospital began. Rajabu did all the running around—paying the bills and collecting the medicines—while Sembe sat at her husband's bedside. The matron arranged for a team of nurses to prepare the patient for movement and also called for transportation. When the ambulance arrived, Amu was whisked into it, Sembe at his side. Rajabu and the others followed in a private car. At the stroke of midnight, Amu was admitted to Westlands. His condition was bad but not anything that the doctors couldn't manage. Sembe spent the night beside him.

The next morning was a Tuesday. The city of Nairobi woke up to the shocking news of the grisly murder of John Kisa, the owner of Mbale Enterprises. His mutilated body had been found deep inside Msitu Forest the night before. Although he had been missing for about two months, his death was believed to have occurred less than forty-eight hours before the body was found. Equally shocking was the news that police had picked up Wanja Peters, a Nairobi lawyer, for questioning in connection with the murder. The information that the lawyer had been seen with the deceased many times and at various places including Grand Duke Hotel and Sun Rays Beach Hotel in Mombasa, added to the speculation that the two could have been lovers, and that the deceased could have been a victim of a love crime.

These pieces of information were in the *Voice* and *Mail*, both of which Rajabu lay on Sembe's lap when she came to the hospital that morning. She also brought a fresh set of clothes, an assortment of fruits, a bottle of health drink and *Nyuka Kal* for her friend. Sembe cast a casual glance at the *Voice* which carried the story on its front page. The picture of Ayugi taken at their Runda home caught her attention. The story below it bemoaned the loss of a leading entrepreneur through the cruel hands of death. The language was both effusive and brisk. It described John Kisa's achievements in lofty terms, accrediting him, perhaps rightfully, with "revolutionising the real estate business" in Kenya. The mention of his membership of the board of trustees for the Kenya Diabetic Association and *Tushinde*, a non-profit organisation caring for AIDS orphans, added a philanthropic note to the list of his achievements. Those who did not know him in real life might have read the story with considerable sadness, Sembe thought. The story of Wanja Peter's arrest, devoid of much detail, was in a separate column. Evident from the prose, the writer was either too conscious of the thin line to be trod between what could have been mere rumours and substantive facts, or wasn't quite enthused by her connection to the gruesome murder. There was no mention of any love relationship between John Kisa and the lawyer, but plenty of insinuations pointing in that direction. Also, there was no mention of any legal matters that the lawyer was handling that had any connection to John Kisa or Mbale Enterprises. Sembe squirmed at

the thought that a keen investigator might find connection between John Kisa, her husband and Wanja. She was terrified. It made her read the story again and even peruse the version in *Mail*. She found some consolation on the fact that the death was said to have occurred only forty-eight hours ago. Amu was in Ndola at that time, doing God knows what. He couldn't have been in Msitu Forest at the same time. She wanted to remove the thought that Amu could have killed a person because of property completely out of her mind and concentrate on the more immediate concerns.

Amu was still unconscious. Sembe looked at him tenderly at first, then crawled over and kissed his cheeks. He just lay there, tubes sticking out from all over his body. Although suffering pain, he was still handsome and Sembe thought how so blissfully happy she would be if he recovered and she took him home. Amu was the only man she had ever truly loved; the only man she had opened herself to, the only man who made her realise and appreciate the depth of her femininity. For eighteen years, he had brought both sadness and happiness to her heart but something about them remained the same. It was the love, the enduring love that she forever felt for him and him for her, despite life's minor distractions. If it were not so, how else could one explain the deep sea of emotions in which she was drowning just then? But, the fear that he could be gone; that he could never wake up, made her weep uncontrollably. "Amu, dear, talk to me. Talk to me, dear. Talk to me please... Tell me how bad I have been. Amu, please..." she cried. Rajabu, intrigued and touched by Sembe's emotional cry, moved closer to her friend and held her by the shoulders.

By this time, the small hospital room was jammed. Sembe's brother, Okola, and his wife, Gladys, were there so was Kizito and his wife, Susana, Cosmas and his wife, as well as a few other relatives and friends. Other than Sembe's intermittent sobs, the room was quiet. At ten o'clock, the entire crowd of relatives and friends was ushered into the visitors' lounge. Sembe remained alone with the patient. She had spent a gruelling twenty-four hours in the hospital and nobody was going to move her from besides her husband. And, even when Dr Ajuoga came around to examine Amu, she was unmoved. The doctor was a stout, middle aged man with a very congenial disposition. He wore a white physician's coat that was

unbuttoned over a casual shirt and brown, neatly starched trousers. "How are you doing today, Mrs Ndeda?" he asked, a wide grin on his face. Without waiting for her response, he quickly pulled on a pair of latex gloves and moved closer to Amu. He bent over him and placed the stethoscope on his bare chest. Then he removed a small flashlight from his pocket, opened Amu's eyelids and directed light in into his eyes. He examined the wounds in his abdomen, the arm which was in a carapace of a hard plaster of Paris, and felt his temperature. Dr Ajuoga turned and looked at Sembe. "Your husband will be all right," he said. Sembe did not say a word, she merely nodded. The doctor left but came back in a few minutes with three nurses. They examined him too. In a short while, they started to move him.

"Where are you taking him?" she asked.

"For some tests," a nurse replied.

"What tests?" she insisted.

"I will come back to explain everything to you, Mrs Ndeda. For now, we must rush him to Neurology," Dr Ajuoga told her.

Sembe followed them until she was restrained by an orderly. Rajabu came from the waiting room and held her by the shoulders. She was pushing to go and was sobbing intensely. She was tendering towards a total loss of control.

"What are they doing to him now?"

"Treating him, that is what they are doing," Rajabu sternly responded.

"Uiih, Uii, Uiiiiih..." she cried. "What are they doing to him? I wish that I had got your note. Oh, Amu, none of this should have happened, Uiii, Uii, Uiiiiih..."

The commotion brought a number of nurses and other orderlies to the location. Rajabu was asked to take her friend outside. Rajabu held Sembe by the waist and slowly led her to the garden. When they were seated on the grass, she told Rajabu about the note that Amu had left at her house on Sunday. She blamed herself. She also narrated the whole story of how she had gone to look for him one night at his flat in Hurlingham but was unable to see him. "I still love him, Rajabu. I still want him. He is my husband. He is the father of my children," she cried. Rajabu just listened, allowing her friend to empty her emotions. The truth, however, was that she,

too, was surprised at the turn of events. The good thing was that Sembe calmed down. Then, they talked about the prospects of Amu recovering fully. Rajabu had thought of mentioning Ayugi but shelved the idea. Any talk about death would be inappropriate since Amu was still in a coma, she thought. Rajabu was relieved when Sembe fell asleep on the grass. She left her to rest and went inside.

When Sembe woke up, Rajabu was nowhere to be seen. She almost burst into tears again when she saw her at the door, beckoning. As they walked to the ward, Rajabu explained that Amu's injuries had developed an infection that spread to his brain. This is why he was in a coma for so long. He had been rushed to the Neurology Department because the doctor noticed him regaining consciousness. He wanted to ascertain whether the infection had cleared. Now, they had brought him back to the ward and the prognosis looked good. "The doctor told me that Amu should be home in another week," Rajabu added, with a long sigh of relief. When they entered the ward, a nurse was attending to Amu. She smiled at them. The stark fear in Sembe's face disappeared as though wiped away with a sponge. She turned to the nurse and asked, "Will he be all right?"

"Oh, yes," the nurse replied.

"Thank God."

"Mrs Ndeda, you must want to talk to your husband alone. He is still very weak so be gentle with him," the nurse said before gathering her papers and disappearing into the passage.

Rajabu followed her.

Amu was lying on the bed, propped up against a mound of pillows. He was now awake but exhausted and drained. She drew up a chair and sat next to him, pulling a corner of his blanket to cover his heavily bandaged belly. She extended her arm to touch his forehead. The corporeality of her touch and the extravagant display of affection had a positive effect on him. He moved his eyes slightly and attempted to say something but a cough got in the way.

"Ssh..." she said, holding his right hand gently.

He lifted his eyes again. "Se...e...m, I ...am... so...r.r.y," he stammered.

"I am sorry too, dear," she responded, rising from the chair to sit beside him on the bed.

Amu was obviously in pain. He attempted to say something again but words wouldn't come out. Sembe noticed the difficulty and smiled at him. "It will be all right, my dear," she whispered. "It will be fine."

Amu looked up at her and a slight grin broke across his face. For a moment, neither of them said a word but, in spirit, they communicated. The bond between them was resuscitated and the force of their love bloated the air around them. Sembe felt the tremors and she closed her eyes. Suddenly, the implosion of emotion was so great that she moved closer to him and kissed him on the forehead. She stretched out on the bed and lay beside him. He lifted his weak hand and placed it on hers. Deep inside, she felt the same warmth and longing that she had felt many years ago. She was his and he was hers, bound together in love forever.

When Sembe discovers that Amu, her husband of fifteen years, is having an affair with another woman, she moves out of the matrimonial home, but is persuaded to return by relatives and friends. However, a few months later, when Amu comes home to reveal that his mistress is pregnant with his child, everything crumbles. The social networks, customs and love that had restrained her from leaving him initially are overcome by the deep feelings of betrayal. The spouses, unable to resolve the matter amicably, immerse in a needless and senseless altercation that culminates in a physical fight. Sembe moves out of the matrimonial home and the marriage collapses. The spouses are left to struggle for the custody of their three daughters and, the ownership of matrimonial property in the plush Kenya suburb of Kileleshwa, through a corrupt Kenyan judicial system. Kileleshwa is a tale of love, betrayal and corruption, set on a background of ethnic incongruity, political uncertainty and very difficult economic times.

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